

世界の中心、針山さん



成田良悟
Ryohgo Narita

【イラスト】
ヤスダスズヒト & エナミカツミ

Hariyama-san, Center of the World

– Sekai no Chuushin –

- Volume 1 -

AUTHOR:

Narita Ryohgo

[Translated by: Azurillturtle]

– SYNOPSIS –

“Hariyama-san, Center of the World is a series of connected short stories by Narita Ryohgo, the author of Durarara!! and Baccano!. They’re basically strange or supernatural events that are seemingly unrelated, except that every one of them involves the title character, Shinkichi Hariyama, as a minor character in some capacity. The last story in each volume ties all the previous stories together.

It doesn’t take place in the Naritaverse (consisting of Durarara!!, Baccano!, Vamp!, and Etsusa Bridge) [...]” ()

——ある新聞記者の独白。

「……俺の所属している新聞つてのはさ、ようするに、ゴシップっていう範疇からさらに外れた……なんて言うのかな、ほら、カツバが出ただの、アメリカの大統領が宇宙人と握手してただの……そんな話が一面に来るような、そんな類の新聞なわけだよ。

今まで味わった物凄い事件か……そりや、色々あるさ。そうだな……まあ、何も言わずに最後まで話を聞いてくれ。

ある男が、仲間の目の前で宇宙人に攫われてよ……。アブダクトってやつか？ それで、そのまま軌道上にある奴らの母船に連れていかれたそうだ。

だがな、ある日そいつはひょっこり帰ってきた。何があつたのか本人は口にしないが、攫われた時に側にいた仲間……、針山って男には全てを話してたらしい。で、その針山つて奴が言うにはだな……

その攫われた奴つてのは、実は狭山忍者の末裔で、人間を傷つける

からと終戦と共に封印されていた忍法で、「宇宙人相手なら多分OK」つて言ってバツタバツと

——おい、待ってくれ、帰るな、勘違いするな！ 話はここからなんだよ。ここからが重要なんだ、な——



「……まあ、その宇宙人の件は信じても信じなくてもいいんだ。話の肝はここからだ。

その……な、【怪盗エタノール】つて知ってるよな？ そう、あの世界的に有名な怪盗だ。必ず予告状を出して、警察やマスコミの監視の中からお宝を頂戴する、漫画に出てくる怪盗ルパンとか怪盗とんちんかんみてえな奴さ。

そいつが、ある民家に対して予告状を出したんだよ。理由は簡単さ。そいつが盗んだ宝石を一時的に隠したブツを、その民家の子供が拾って帰っちゃったんだ。……だが、プライドの高い怪盗様は、取り戻すのにもいちいち予告状を出したのさ。

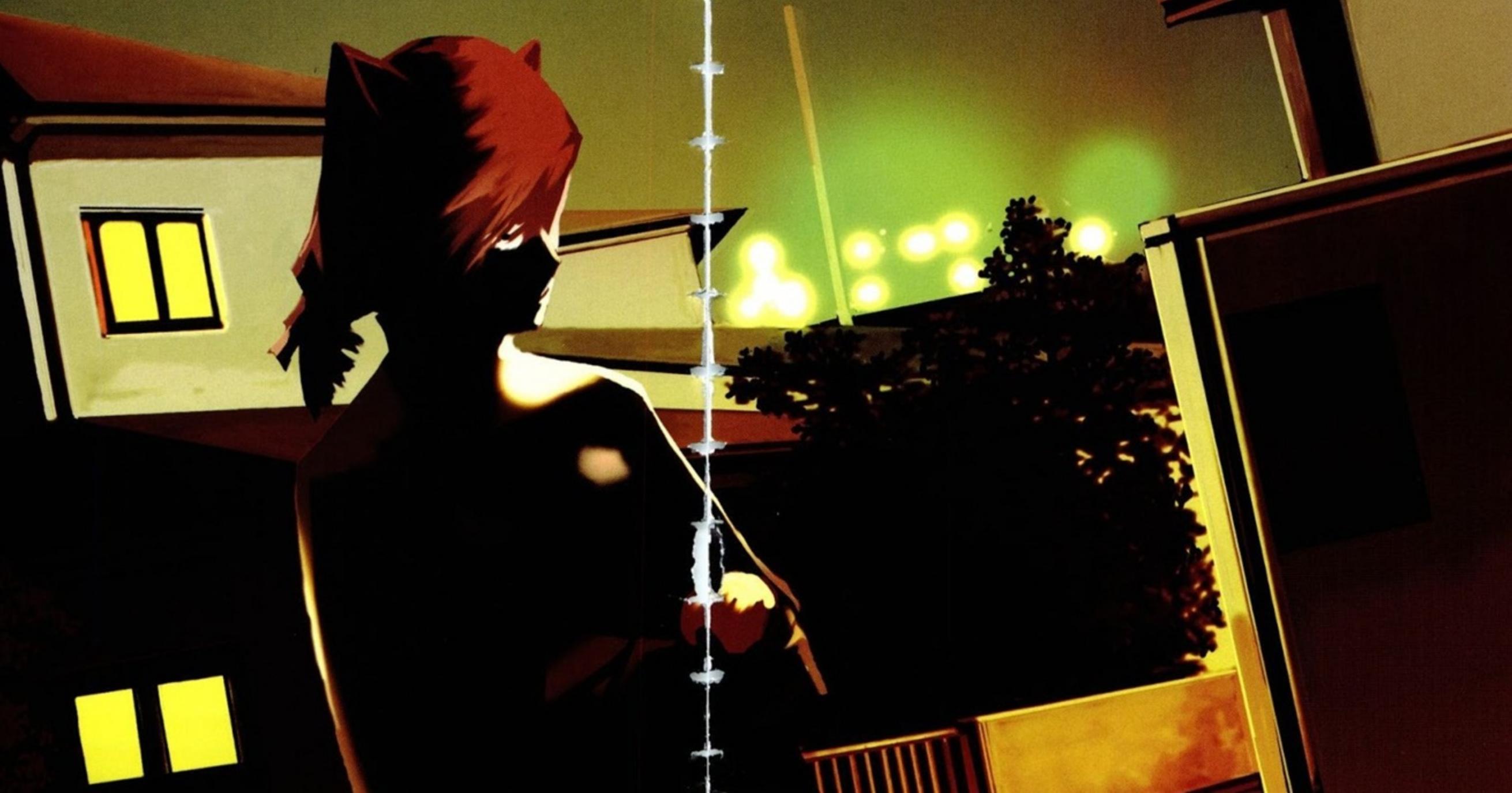
まあ……だが、結局、盗みは成功しなかったわけだ。予告状に書かれた指定日時に……そのブツは、

その民家の玄関に【間違って持ってきてごめんなさい】って子供の書き置きと一緒に置かれてたんだからな。プライドを傷つけられた怪盗は、その後もその家にちよつかいを出し続けて、どうでもいいようなもんを予告状を出して盗み続けたんだよ。……まあ、その家族が被害届を出さなかつたから、それ以上は事件にならなかつたんだけどな。……ある日、居間に予告状に書かれた品物と一緒に【よかつたらどうぞ】って紙と一緒に蜜柑が置いてあつて、それ以来怪盗はその民家と仲良くしてるらしい。アホだよな。

……これが、さっきの宇宙人の話とどう繋がるのかって？

……その民家の家族の名字、針山つて言うんだよ。

ほら……攫われた奴の友人だつた……な



「……単なる偶然だと思うかい？」

そう。まさしくその通り。偶然然

なんだよ。だが、偶然も十回重なりや必然だ。その後も、俺の取材した様々な眉唾もんの事件。その悉くに奴は姿を現した。その事件の主役じゃない、決まって通りすがりだとか、目撃者だとか、単なる【事件の脇役】の一人としてだ！

公式試合初勝利事件。航空公園
ドライバー自撃事件。

最近だと、そいつの家が謎の大爆発を起こした事もあつたな。火の気が全くない爆発で、結局原因不明で落ち着いたがね。

中にはうちですら記事にできなかつたような事件もあるが……俺が取材したうち、これだけ多くの事件に、奴は必ず顔を出してい

針山真吉、37才。童顔だがスタイルバッチャリな奥さんと、高校生の娘に小学生の息子、職業はグラフイックデザイナーで、基本的なチラシや書籍、パートの看板から会社のロゴマーク、ゲームソフトのパッケージまで、デザインする幅の広さを持つ。……無論、デザイナーとしては成功している方だが……それがだけだ。宇宙人を呼ぶ才も超

能力も靈感も無い、人間的なスペックだけを見れば極々凡人だ！……なのに、いつも彼の周りには

何かが起ってる。あの針山って男の存在自体が——俺が今まで扱った一番奇妙な【事件】だ。

一つ二つの事件では完全に脇役なのに、彼の視点から見れば——自分を中心に、全く方向性の違う様々な【事件】が広がっている。

URBAN LEGEND

(GENRE "URBAN LEGEND")

Urban legend “The Axe Man Under the Bed”

This is something that happened on the night a certain man brought his girlfriend back to his room.

Like always, they were idly wasting time, lying sprawled out on the bed and the floor – when all of a sudden his girlfriend said something strange.

“Hey, I wanna eat ice cream.”

When the man went to get ice cream from the refrigerator, his girlfriend said she wanted to eat more expensive ice cream.

“How about we go to the convenience store and buy some? Okay?”

The man thought it was a pain, but he reluctantly went along with what she suggested and went to the convenience store.

However, once they left his home, his girlfriend’s expression suddenly stiffened and she headed in the opposite direction from the convenience store – she started running towards the police box.

When, completely puzzled, the man asked her, his girlfriend answered with tears streaming down her face:

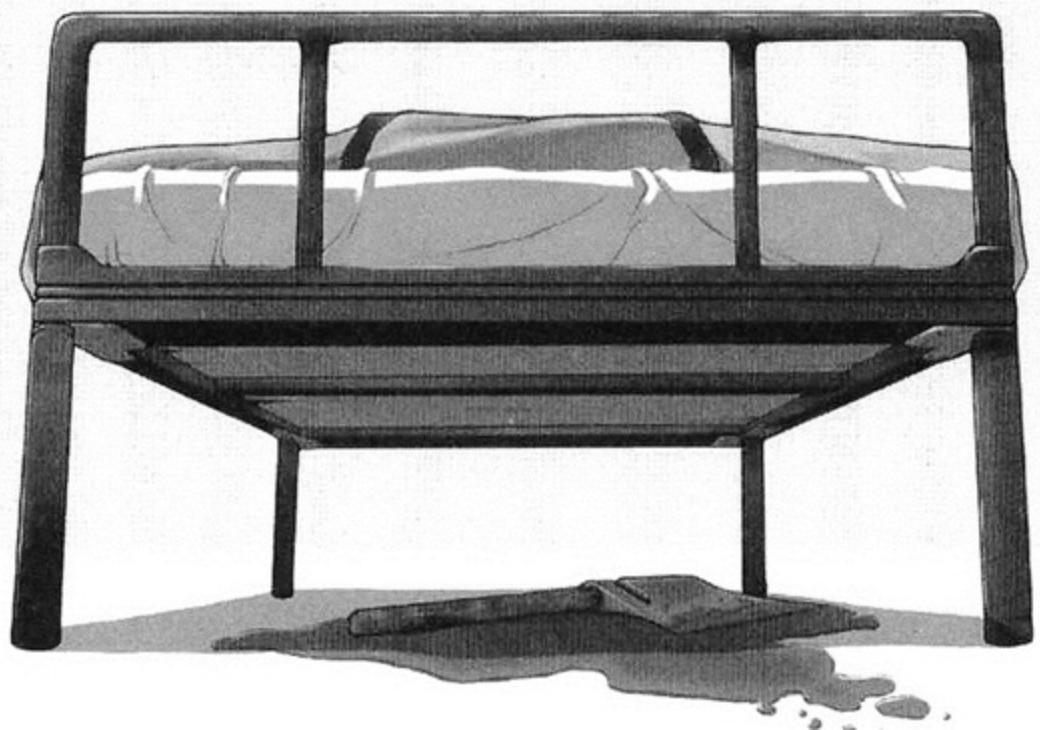
“I saw it. There was a man holding a blood-covered axe hiding in the space under your bed...!”

-A famous urban legend from long ago

A Side: “Axe Man Tragedy”

としれじえ

・ジャンル『都市伝説』



"This is a follow-up report on the serial murder case in Saitama the other day. We have received information about the murder weapons from the autopsy results. The weapons seem to be two large tools, an axe and a hatchet. Authorities say..."

As she watched the news scrolling on the televisions lined up in the electronics store, Lulu Akagami – Lulu called out cheerfully.

"Hey, hey!"

"Huh...?"

The man she was speaking to answered unenthusiastically, shifting his attention from the MD corner he had been facing to look at his companion.

"Didn't this thing happen around here? You should be careful too, Muu."

In response to Lulu, who spoke her worries in a carefree tone, Muu Hifumi – Muu answered with a mild smile.

"You too, Lulu."

Just from their conversation, it sounded like they were two sweethearts calling each other by fancy nicknames, but those were very much their real names.

The two of them had been in the same class in school. They both had strange names, so they became aware of each other. Their classmates teased them, saying things like, "You two should go out already," but without really growing closer or farther apart, they started hanging out as classmates who got along well.

And this year, they were in the same second-year class – if a bystander were to see them, they had grown so close, they looked just like boyfriend and girlfriend. Lulu thought of them as more than friends but less than lovers, but she had never asked what Muu thought.

No matter what he thought, they were able to be together like they were now without harming their relationship. Though she also had those kinds of calculating thoughts, she didn't really wish for any progress with Muu. The way they were now was enough for her.

She didn't know anything about what Muu thought, but Lulu didn't really care. Today the two of them were spending their summer vacation together again, with their relationship the same as always, not too close and not too distant.

After leaving the town's small appliance shop, the two of them took a walk and headed towards Muu's place.

It was a small, slightly old apartment, located in a building that would not look out of place in a simple residential area, but it was one of two buildings lined up on the same street.

The two-story apartment buildings looked almost exactly alike, set apart only by the roofs, which were painted red and blue.

At present, Muu lived alone in the apartment building with the blue roof.

"There isn't anyone else here yet."

"Mm, that's because it's far from both the train station and bus stop. The building with the red roof next to it doesn't even have one room filled."

Muu said in a tone that said it wasn't particularly problematic and briskly walked to the entrance of his apartment. It was the first door on the first floor and the windows on the other side faced the highway.

It was already the fifth time Lulu had come here, and she had stayed over several times.

However, nothing had happened between them when she did, and they still had not even kissed.

A number of her friends were surprised, saying, "Ehhh, no way! You can't stay at a boy's house and have nothing happen!", but those types of people probably didn't have any male friends, much less boyfriends.

Most likely, they were envious and jealous of male-female relationships. That was what Lulu had decided.

'I don't really care what happens. It's not like we're really boyfriend and girlfriend and it's not like I want it to be that way.'

Lulu thought their current standpoint was good, outside the boundaries of being friends or lovers.

That was why nothing would happen again today.

She had told her family she would be staying over at a classmate's house today, so she hadn't really lied.

To be specific, they would watch videos and play games until they got tired and went to sleep.

It was the same everyday life as always, with nothing out of the ordinary.

Naturally, Lulu thought that would be the case today.

However – in truth, that everyday life was already disappearing.

From the moment when they had entered his home, or from the time Lulu had walked around the electronics store with Muu, already–

A single abnormality had invaded into their everyday lives.

Or to be more specific–

–into the space under Muu's bed.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

"So then, there's a girl in the class next to ours named Hariyama-san, and I'm pretty good friends with her, right? It's amazing! Her father is a famous designer. He does everything, like billboards for a lot of stores and even the title logos of games. I wonder if he's rich."

"Speaking of which, Maruhira, in our class – his cousin is a manga author. Did you know that?"

"Really!? That's amazing! He must be a billionaire! So what's it in? Jump? Magazine?"

[Weekly Shounen Jump and Magazine are periodical manga publications.]

Smiling faintly, Muu shook his head at Lulu, who was leaning forward in excitement as she questioned him.

"Nah, he draws 'Impact Jammer' in a magazine called Raigeki Ousha."

"Huuuh. Is it selling well?"

"I can't say how much he makes. But it looks like they're making an anime out of it."

"That's great. I guess if you're a manga author, you really do have to get an anime series and have snow sculptures made at snow festivals!"

As their pointless conversation continued, Lulu threw herself heavily on her back on the cushions on the floor.

The white-painted ceiling evenly reflected the light from the suspended cheap fluorescent bulbs.

Old apartments were by no means cramped. The main living area was a wide Western-style room with an area of about ten tatami mats, and the apartment came complete with bath and kitchen.

Frankly, it could be said that it was too extravagant for a high school student to live here alone. However, because it was far from the train station, the rent was only about 50,000 yen, so there was nothing to worry about.

Lulu and Muu were in the Western room reading magazines, Muu sitting on the bed and Lulu rolling around on the carpet like a cat.

"It's already eight? I guess I am starting to get sleepy."

Muu stood calmly and took a quick glance outside through the window.

As Lulu rolled on the floor, she saw the stars just beginning to come out in the sky through the window. She realized she was starting to get hungry.

"Hey, what are we doing for dinner?"

She asked casually, but Muu continued looking outside silently as if he hadn't heard.

"Hey, heeeeey."

"Hm? Ah, sorry, sorry. What is it?"

Snapping out of it, Muu looked back at her and sat down on the bed again.

"Geez. Okay, so for dinner..."

Rolling over heavily, at the moment when she faced Muu, she felt a strange sense of unease.

Muu was sitting on the bed. Below that bed, naturally, she could see Muu's two legs.

However, Lulu's eyes noticed something unnatural in the space between the light jeans he was wearing.

'What is that?'

In an instant, it felt like she alone had been left behind as time continued to pass in the world.

Absolutely no sound from around her entered her ears. Only the sound of her heart strongly thudding penetrated the fog surrounding her mind.

"You should be worried."

Every nerve in her brain warned her, ruled by fear.

"You shouldn't check immediately."

Her survival instincts warned her.

As the two instincts warred with each other, Lulu slowly, slowly lowered her gaze.

She could see Muu's face. As usual, he wore a faint smile and she could not tell what he was thinking.

She could see Muu's chest. A black T-shirt with the fancy design of a bear with blood flowing from its mouth.

She could see Muu's stomach and the wall behind the bed. It was a dreary room without even one poster on the wall.

She could see Muu's belt. The pointless metal objects there clinked together. There was nothing else that stood out as much on the frugal boy.

She could see Muu's knees. It may have been the fashion for his worn-out jeans to already be dirty.

Up to now, nothing was different from usual.

Up to now, it was definitely normal.

She could still turn back. Even as she thought so, Lulu could not stop her gaze.

Her field of view slowly dropped lower and lower, toward the underside of the bed.

And then-

The first thing she saw was stained the color of flesh.

'He's there.'

Just from that, Lulu was convinced.

'He's there...'

'He's there.'

'He's there!'

"There's something... under the bed!"

Lulu's eyes widened, and the entirety of the darkness filling the space under the bed entered her vision.

What lay there was clearly a human's entire body.

She knew from a glance that it was a man from his rugged physique. He was lying on his stomach, facing her, in the space under the bed.

Luckily, the upper half of the man's face was hidden by Muu's leg. If their eyes had met, she would have been screaming right now.

And... She saw it clearly.

At the man's side lay a dull-colored axe, dyed red with rust.

*'Under... Under the bed, with an axe... **There's someone carrying an axe!**'*

A shock ran through Lulu's whole body, and she twitched just once, as if she had been struck by lightning.

It seemed Muu hadn't noticed her state of shock. His head was turned to look outside through the window behind him.

From what she could see, Muu was engrossed in his normal, everyday life.

However, right now she was completely removed from that normality.

From the moment she had noticed the "thing" underneath the bed-

And after that, everything Lulu had seen with her own eyes had become an object of fear.

Someone was in the gap underneath the bed. With that truth as a foundation, everything about the world around the girl had been remade.

The apartment Muu lived in, with the large Western-style room.

She felt like that room, where they were supposed to have spent an enjoyable time together, was now like a prison from another dimension.

The window was far away.

The window and door were so far away.

The world outside felt far away.

The breeze from the air conditioner caressed her back cruelly. The coldness of that breeze finally snapped Lulu back to her senses.

'Eh...'

'Who is that!?'

It was an extremely simple but extremely necessary question.

It may have been her imagination or it may have been her eyes playing tricks on her. She tried to convince herself of that many times, but no matter how many times she strained her eyes, there really was a man underneath the bed.

Lulu slowly raised her gaze from the man, who was not so much as twitching.

And then, Muu, who was living his everyday life as usual, faced Lulu and smiled casually.

That smile relieved Lulu of some of her fear. However, she hadn't completely overcome it. At most, it was a momentary reprieve.

The strange thing was that Lulu was not that afraid of the axe the man was holding.

What she was most afraid of was the "truth" of the man's existence underneath the bed. With that, Lulu already felt that her life was threatened.

It was strange that she still had not screamed, but Lulu was thankful that she could still continue to think calmly.

As she focused her gaze on the ceiling, she took several seconds to try and grasp the situation in which they found themselves.

Lulu could guess immediately who the man under the bed was.

'The one on the news before-'

The unidentified, brutal serial killer who had shown up nearby.

The televisions lined up in the electronics store had said his weapon was something similar to an axe.

Because she was thinking calmly, a different kind of fear than that of a little while ago began to swirl within Lulu.

It went from the instinctive fear of the "unknown" to the rational fear of a "clear crisis".

'What do I do? Is this for real? Is it seriously happening? Why? Why does it have to happen to us...!'

Even then, Lulu kept herself calm. It may have been because she still held the faint hope that this was a dream, but on the contrary, that very calmness convinced her all the more that this was real.

Should she scream or immediately stand up and try to run away?

The murderer was under the bed, and it would take time for him to crawl out. If they took that chance to run-

'Can we really do it?'

She could scream now, stand up from where she lay, and escape through the door.

She had to be able to stand up. If she screamed, she could not panic.

'The most important thing is what to do with Muu. If he hears me scream, or if he hears me yell "Run!", I wonder if he'll move right away.'

Before the murderer crawled out from under the bed.

To begin with, even if they escaped through the apartment door, how far should they run?

There was no police box in this neighborhood, and even if they ran to the nearest convenience store, it was far enough that it would take more than five minutes to reach.

To add to the fact that few people passed by this neighborhood to begin with, it was already growing dark.

On top of that, this apartment building had no occupant other than Muu.

If, just if, the murderer was faster.

When she thought that, Lulu felt relieved that she had not inadvertently screamed.

'How about writing a note to tell him?'

She thought of that, but it would be bad if he asked something like "What are you writing?" while she wrote.

Somehow, they needed a way to get outside without making the killer under the bed suspicious-

"Huh? What is it, Lulu?"

Lulu had been silent for a while, and, puzzled, Muu called out to her.

"Eh? Oh, yeah. It's nothing. I was just spacing out a bit!"

"...Really?"

Muu nodded with his usual smile at Lulu, who was doing her best to force a smile.

As Lulu adjusted her breathing, she thought of what she had to do now.

'Anyway, I can't let the murderer figure it out. That I've realized he's here.'

He was hiding under the bed probably because he was waiting for his prey to fall asleep so he could then kill them at his leisure.

In that case, she had to get Muu out of the apartment so the murderer wouldn't suspect anything.

If she could just get outside with him, she could explain the situation as much as he wanted later. If they did that, they would be able to take their time and contact the police.

Lulu quietly took in a breath and told herself something.

'Calmly, calmly, speak like you always do. You can't sound scared or panicked. Your normal voice, like when you're calm.'

"Hey, Muu."

"What?"

'Smile, smile, smile. You can't show fear.'

"Hey, I wanna eat ice cream."

She would act selfish and make him go to the convenience store with her to buy ice cream. That was the easiest way to get him outside. That was what she thought, but-

"Ah, there's some ice cream in the refrigerator."

She had half-expected Muu's answer. But Lulu would not give up.

"No, I want to eat super-expensive Häagen-Dazs ice cream!"

She was acting like a brat, but this was no time to say so. Looking away, she lifted herself up from where she lay and sat cross-legged.

Her gaze rested softly on the underside of the bed, but from this height, she could not see the murderer's body. As she took comfort in this, Lulu appealed to Muu to make him come outside.

"Hey, it's fine, right, Muu? I'll pay for it, so let's go buy some at the convenience store!"

'Okay, good job, me! You sounded just like you always do! Now I just need to take Muu outside and-'

"I've got some."

"Eh?"

Muu stood up straight and headed in the direction of the refrigerator in the dining room.

When Muu suddenly stood up, Lulu felt cold sweat running down her spine and turned her senses to the underside of the bed, but luckily, there did not seem to be any reaction.

In that time, Muu took out a cup of high-end ice cream from the freezing compartment on the top shelf of the refrigerator.

"Here."

"T-thanks."

'Seriously, what!? I thought he was part of the bourgeoisie but he keeps this kind of high-end ice cream...!'

Feeling unreasonably indignant, Lulu took the ice cream and the spoon.

The chilly sensation spread through her palm, but it was nothing compared to the chill down Lulu's back.

It wasn't like she really wanted to eat ice cream, but if she didn't eat it, the person under the bed would get suspicious.

Since he hadn't come out yet, he probably had no intention of coming out until the two of them fell asleep. However, that was only if he thought they didn't notice him.

Acting like she hadn't noticed anything at all under the bed, she brought the ice cream to her mouth.

The sweetness spread within her mouth as it melted. The deliciousness made her feel all the more frustrated. If not for the situation, it would have really cheered her up, but-

As she thought that, Lulu's breath caught suddenly.

'This is bad. I-I can't let it be silent.'

If the room fell quiet, Muu might also notice that he could hear the breathing of three people within the room.

However, at the same time, she realized the axe man might also think, "They'll notice I'm here."

Both Muu and herself were currently eating ice cream in silence. It seemed the murderer was holding his breath, but what if he started breathing loudly?

Then what if Muu started to worry and peered under the bed?

She had to avoid that at all costs. As Lulu began to speak again, she continued trying to think of some way to get the two of them outside.

"Hey... Do you want to go out to eat for dinner?"

Lulu realized her mistake as soon as she said it.

If they left for dinner, they wouldn't be back for a while. Knowing that, the murderer might decide to kill them now while he had the chance.

Come to think of it, "I'll kill them after they fall asleep" was an arbitrary rule that Lulu had come up with herself. It was irrational to hope that the murderer would stick to that.

Without thinking, she glanced under the bed, but in the end, nothing was crawling out.

"Mm, but there aren't really any restaurants around here and it's a pain to go all the way to the station."

"T-that's true."

As she murmured in a voice full of mingled relief and disappointment, Lulu thought up her next plan.

'What should I do? Something he doesn't have in his home that we can buy right now...'

She put her thoughts in order and hit upon her next method.

"That's right, there are a lot of this week's manga magazines I still haven't read. Do you wanna go buy them at the convenience store?"

"All the magazines are on hiatus this week."

'Ugh!'

"Then... Hey, do you wanna go drinking?"

"? Why all of a sudden? We're still not of age, you know?"

"I just feel like it! Hey, how about it?"

"Hmm, I guess."

'Yes! Now if we just go to the nearest liquor store-'

"Here."

"Eh?"

In the next moment, what Lulu saw was-

Muu taking what looked like bottles of foreign liquor from the closet.

As he lined up several bottles on the table, Muu smiled at her with a truly blissful expression.

"Which do you want, vodka or whiskey or tequila?"

"Why do you have booze!? Weren't you the one saying we're not of age!?"

"No, when my dad comes over, he brings some over and drinks it alone, and he leaves the leftovers here when he goes back."

"..."

In front of Lulu, who was uncharacteristically lost for words, Muu gazed at the bottles of liquor and muttered as if to himself.

"...No, I'm really glad I have booze."

"...?"

Lulu was a bit worried by Muu's turn of phrase just now. What exactly did he mean by "I'm really glad"?

But there was no time to worry about that.

Right now, they needed to act natural and get outside.

"H-hey, you know, I want to drink something weaker."

"It's fine if you split it up. You can add water or ice."

"That's not it! You know, like wine!"

'Ah, geez! Why did it turn out like this?'

"Hey, let's go buy delicious cocktails or something from the liquor store!"

"The liquor store is already closed."

"It might still be open! Come on, let's go take a look!"

She was probably being too pushy, but it couldn't be helped. Lulu grabbed Muu's hand and tried to stand up.

He may have suspected something, but it shouldn't have been too suspicious. Actually, there was still no sign of movement under the bed.

However-

Muu clutched Lulu's hand instead and pulled tightly, as if to keep her from going outside.

"Eh...?"

As a result of his completely unexpected actions, Lulu reseated herself without thinking.

"Geez... it's closed."

That was when Lulu realized.

When Muu spoke, he had already regained his usual smile, but the moment he had strongly squeezed her hand, his eyes had not been laughing at all.

Muu, who until then had been living his everyday life, had been next to Lulu in the present for just a moment – it was as if he had set foot into the unordinary.

'...What? What was that... just now?'

She had a strong feeling of unease.

Was the person in front of her the real Muu?

Normally the question would make her snort with laughter, but Lulu was currently living in the unordinary.

Various theories about the “more than friend” smiling right in front of her spun through her mind.

Why did my “less than lover” – suddenly stop me just now?

She finally arrived at one possibility, and she opened her mouth to confirm it.

“Hey, is it okay if I go out and get some fresh air?”

And without waiting for his reply, she tried to stand up.

Then–

“You really shouldn’t.”

Muu got up only a little faster than Lulu and stood in the doorway leading to the dining room as if to block her way.

And what he added then sounded like an excuse.

“Um... You know, because there are a lot of mosquitos outside.”

Already his words did not reach Lulu’s ears.

It had only been a faint suspicion, but it changed into belief at Muu’s current behavior.

‘Muu’s doing this so I don’t go outside – no, so I don’t escape...!?’



— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

Why, why does Muu have to keep me in this room? Now when there's a murderer hiding in here!

Lulu wanted to scream and press the issue, but there was no way she could do that.

The current issue was that there was a murderer sharing the same space as them, and even now he might have been listening in on their conversation.

In other words, if she was too obvious about taking him outside, the murderer would catch on right there and then.

However, a bigger problem had now reared its head.

For some reason, Muu did not want her to go outside.

If she tried to force him to go outside, or if she tried to escape outside alone – the murderer under the bed would probably begin his “slaughter”.

'But why!?'

Why wouldn't Muu let her go out? Was he excited that he was under the same roof as her? There was no way. She'd stayed at his place countless times before now, and when she did, he let her leave as she pleased.

'Why is he stopping me today!? Is there something, anything, different? Is there anything different between us only today?'

Lulu racked her brains immediately.

And then she hit upon a single, simple answer.

'Yeah. There is. Something about us that's different from normal!'

She confirmed that “point of difference”, but it only threw her into a whirlwind of doubt once again.

'The only thing that's different from normal-

'It's got to be the murderer under the bed.'

But then why?

If Muu had realized there was someone under the bed, wouldn't he want to get outside somehow, the same as Lulu? There was no way he would be more worried about his room being ransacked after they left.

There was only one possibility...

'Muu knew from the beginning?'

"That the murderer was under the bed?"

The idea that she herself had come up with only confused Lulu more and more.

"Ah... I'll make dinner."

Saying that, Muu began to walk to the kitchen. It was as if he was doing it to distract from his unnatural behavior.

During that time, Lulu focused her gaze on the space under the bed a second time. She really couldn't see the murderer if she was sitting up, but she definitely didn't have the courage to lower her head and look. Everything would be over the moment their eyes met.

'But, if – what if Muu knew from the start that there's a man under the bed? And what if the murderer under the bed knows he knows?'

Muu and the murderer were accomplices. That terrible thought whirled through her mind.

However, she didn't know the reason for it. If they were accomplices, what in the world were they planning to do? Maybe what was under the bed was

There, the girl had another unpleasant thought.

A while ago, she had noticed the existence of a man under the bed.

However, that was all.

She hadn't checked if the man was awake or asleep or even whether he was alive to begin with.

'*Maybe.*'

Her imagination began to run away with her and then led her to one conclusion.

'Maybe what's under the bed is really a corpse?'

Muu was hiding a corpse – and he knew that she knew the corpse was there.

'So he's trying to silence me!?'

But the reasoning behind that was strange.

Why would the corpse of the murderer be under Muu's bed? Normally it would be the other way around.

Why

Why

Why

Numerous questions appeared and then disappeared within Lulu's mind. Each time a new question arose, it completely erased the question before it.

Why

Why

Why why why why why why why why why why why why-

Her goal had been to safely escape from this room with Muu.

However, it was different now. Now Lulu's mission was to accurately understand the situation, and she thought that everything would be resolved once she had accomplished that.

Then she finally reached a conclusion.

'I see.'

Lulu, who had fallen into an extreme situation upon seeing the man under the bed, thought that she herself was calm.

However, it was true that she was in a state of confusion. That was why she reached it. This impossible conclusion.

'So that's how it was. In that case, everything makes sense!'

It was an answer that would please no one.

"The "corpse" under that bed isn't an assailant or a murderer. He's the victim! My mind was distorted by fear and panic and jumped to a distorted conclusion. That probably wasn't the truth."

"The axe doesn't belong to that man, it was the murder weapon hidden along with the corpse!"

"The axe-wielding serial killer was Muu!"



More than friends, less than lovers.

For Lulu, Muu Hifumi – that was the sort of person Muu was.

However, in the end that was Lulu's own opinion.

What if he thought of her in a completely different way?

As a girlfriend?

As a friend?

Or – **as prey**?

Lulu wanted to know for sure.

Was the reason Muu wouldn't let her outside because he planned to use her as a sacrificial lamb to start the “slaughter”?

Had the normal days she had spent with Muu up until now been a lie?

If they hadn't been a lie...

'Or maybe.'

If Muu fell in love with her, really fell in love with her, that may have been why he chose her as his prey.

It may have been the degenerate love of a murderer.

She didn't want to die yet or be killed. If Muu tried to kill her, Lulu would try with all her strength to escape and resist.

However, she wanted to know why she would be killed.

Besides, she still had hope.

If her reasoning up until now had been completely off the mark and what was under the bed really was the murderer, everything up until now would just have been a misunderstanding on Lulu's part.

'Which one do I wish for?'

What did she really want Muu to be to her? In this situation, the excuse that “The way we've been until now is best” wouldn't cut it.

'Friends or lovers, either is fine. I just wanted to be together with Muu.'

She hated it. She really hated the conclusion that Muu was a murderer. That alone was something she really, really hated.

'That's right. If he runs away with me – then I can prove Muu isn't a murderer.'

Delusion and reason had gone full circle and gone back to the beginning. Without realizing that, Lulu slowly strengthened her beliefs.

To confirm those thoughts – to confirm her own existence, there was one thing she had to do.

However, Lulu, who continued to be terrified, felt so cornered – that it was enough to drive her to commit a crime.

Lulu turned to look back at Muu, who was in the kitchen cutting vegetables, and quietly stood up.

As if noticing her presence, Muu stopped his knife hand and looked at Lulu.

"...What is it? Lulu."

Muu asked as if confused, and Lulu spoke expressionlessly.

"Hey, Muu. Do you love me?"

"Huh!?"

At the sudden question, Muu dropped the knife onto the chopping board without thinking.

"W-why're you asking all of a sudden?"

"Answer me."

Lulu's gaze was serious, and Muu answered her, his head tilted to the side.

"Haven't you been acting weird today?"

"You're the one acting weird, Muu!"

As she yelled that, Lulu realized that she was saying something unreasonable.

However, even if it was unreasonable, it wasn't a lie.

It was true that Muu had been weird today, and he had definitely been acting suspiciously.

"Hey, please. Go back to the way you usually are, Muu."

"The way I usually am... I'm the same as always."

There really was something unnatural about those words.

"I want to make sure of it – please, there's somewhere I want to go together."

Before she finished speaking, Lulu had begun walking quickly toward the entryway.

However, Muu, who had been in the kitchen, quickly got in her way.

"Dinner will be done soon. Let's go tomorrow, okay?"

His face showed a smile, but she could see sweat standing out on his forehead.

"Hey, Muu."

Seeing him like that, Lulu stated one truth with an expressionless face.

"Why won't you let me go outside?"

"....."

It was a spur-of-the-moment question. If the person under the bed was a murderer, these words would be enough to make him suspicious.

However, Lulu could not stop talking.

"Please, go outside with me."

"You're being weird too, Lulu! Why would you... you've been trying to go out for a while now!"

Muu raised his voice, and Lulu smiled emotionlessly at him and spoke. As she became aware that her heart, which she had thought was calm, was already breaking-

"We're on completely different wavelengths, Muu."

Even so, she continued to speak.

It was as if she were trying to completely bury her own existence with words alone.

"Lulu..."

"But, Muu. I'm gonna go outside. With you. I can do that, you know?"

She quietly moved forward, facing Muu and taking one step closer to him.

"Hey, Muu. I know everything about what's in your room. Because I've been here so many times..."

Saying that, she placed a hand on one of the shelves near the entrance to the room.

There were numerous matches and lighters there, and Lulu silently took one of the matches in her hand.

"Oi, Lulu, what are—"

Muu stopped in mid-sentence as he realized something unusual about his room.

It was oddly full of the scent of booze.

Alcohol permeated the air more than usual, saturating it so heavily that it was as if one could get drunk from the smell alone.

When he looked – there were traces of the bed and the floor being soaked.

On top of the table in front of that, one of the bottles of alcohol he had put out a while ago – the vodka bottle was now empty.

“Lulu!”

At the same time as he shouted-

Lulu tossed the lit match atop the bed.

And then – blue-white flames flared to life, as if to envelop the bed.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

“Sorry... Muu. If you’re innocent, I’ll take full responsibility...”

Lulu’s eyes were filled with madness, and Muu worried about whether or not his words would reach her.

“Lulu...”

“If it’s like this... If it’s like this, **we’re definitely going outside, right?**”

From her behavior, she definitely had her priorities backwards. Now, if the person under the bed was a murderer, it would be hard for him to chase them, but her goal had already switched from “Leave the room together without the murderer noticing” to “No matter what it takes, get out of Muu’s room that he’s trying to keep you in”.

Before she even finished speaking, she made as if to escape outside.

“You too, Muu, you should hurry and–”

The moment she tried to open the door leading outside – Lulu was embraced tightly from behind.

“Eh...?”

The one who embraced her was Muu.

He held her firmly in his arms, as if protecting her from the fire–

“You can’t... **You can’t go outside!** I’ve got a fire extinguisher, so I’ll put out the fire!”

The fire was still burning up the alcohol and had not yet spread to the curtains and wall. If they took the appropriate fire-fighting measures right now, it would be possible to extinguish it while it was still small.

“Why, why!?”

Emotion had returned to Lulu’s voice, and she screamed questions at Muu. Muu also wore a serious expression, and as he grabbed the fire extinguisher in the entryway with one hand, he desperately struggled to extract the pin with the other.

“I – I want to protect you, Lulu!”

“Eh...?”

Lulu gazed at Muu’s face, not understanding his meaning, and at that moment–

Guoooo0000oAaaaa00000AAAAAAaaaaaOOAawaaaAaaa000Aaaaa0000A

The outrageous scream echoed through the room – the man with the axe leapt out from under the bed, his body covered in flames.

He had been caught between the vodka-soaked bed and floor, and the flames had caught across his body where it lay hidden.

“Kyaa!?”

“Aaaaah!? What’s going on!?”

Lulu and Muu shouted at the same time – and then Lulu looked at Muu’s expression of surprise.

“The murderer – he really is a murderer. Then why does Muu want me to stay in this room...?”

As she thought that, the man with the axe approached them.

“Waaaaaaaah!”

At the same time, the fire extinguisher Muu was holding vigorously sprayed out foam.

GuwAAAAAaaaaAAAAAaaaAAAAAAA

The vigorous spray of extinguishing foam hit the axe man directly in the face, and he strongly swung the axe down as he shielded his eyes with one hand.

A violent sound rang out, and the axe went right by Lulu and Muu and forcefully tore down the door leading outside.

The man, whose clothes were dotted with flames, gave up on Lulu and Muu as his prey and dashed off as fast as he could toward the highway.

Left behind were – Lulu, who had sunk to the floor and was silent, and Muu, who had calmed down and was trying with all his might to extinguish the fire.

“What happened...”

Lulu asked Muu, wearing an absentminded expression.

“What just happened?”

Muu just barely managed to put out the fire, and the moment he opened his mouth to say something-

GyaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAaaaAAAaaaaaaaAaaaaaaaAaaaaaaa
AAAAAAAaaaAaaaaaaaAaaaaaaaAaaaaaaaAaaaaaaa

The intense shriek pierced through the dark night and reverberated through the room around Lulu and Muu.

The two of them momentarily froze at the extremely ghastly scream.

Several minutes passed after that. Muu took Lulu's hand and made her stand, and they peered outside from the entryway.

And what they saw there was-

"What... is this..."

About ten meters away from the door, at the entrance to the apartment lot, illuminated by the outside lights-

Was a huge, huge pool of water that hadn't been there when they entered the apartment.

There were no other living things around. Only the cries of cicadas and frogs could be heard from somewhere far away.

Staying on the alert, the two of them timidly approached that pool – and realized.

That pool of water was a dark, cloudy red–

"Ahh, ahh, it's true, it's really true."

The moment they confirmed that fact, Muu spoke as if to himself.

"What I saw was real... I-I-I didn't think you'd believe me so I didn't say anything – I didn't say anything...! I saw it, I saw it!"

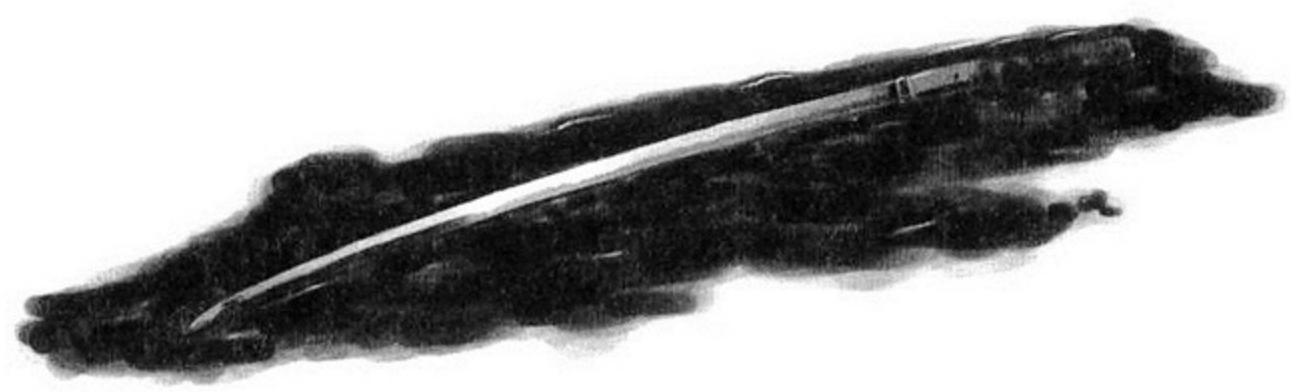
Muu's knees were shaking violently. Wearing an expression he would normally never show Lulu, he quietly told her what only he had seen–

Hearing that, Lulu understood everything.

"I saw it... I saw it!"

“Outside the apartment – there was a man covered in blood holding a katana – he looked really angry...! He was running around like he would kill someone!”

B side: "Axe Man Comedy"



"This is a follow-up report on the serial murder case in Saitama the other day. We have received information about the murder weapons from the autopsy results. The weapons seem to be two large tools, an axe and a hatchet. Authorities say..."

I left my room, sending a backward glance at that broadcast.

The serial killer who had been disturbing the peace of society. Seems like he'd **also** been using an axe and stirring things up.

'What a coincidence.'

I myself... had only just bought this sharp axe today at the home improvement store.

For what?

Naturally – to kill someone.

Right, "someone".

Anyone was fine.

As long as they would go along with it.

No, but if I could, I'd like a cute girl. And if my opponent was a man, I would be attacked back and killed without any effort at all...

Anyway, they should struggle futilely in the end. I wanted to kill and kill until I was killed myself.

I would establish proof that I had lived.

No matter what kind of bad name it gave me–

Ah, it was already the end.

This was the end.

Everything in my life ended today.

It ended a little while ago.

No, I might not have had a life to begin with. Everything was a dream or an illusion.

I was dumped by my girlfriend.

That was all.

To be more accurate, she was the girl I had planned on making my girlfriend.

When I gathered my courage and confessed to her, it turned out she already had a boyfriend.

And yet, her relationship with him wasn't the kind where they kissed and fooled around together. It was the kind where they were more than friends but less than lovers.

What's that about?

Don't screw with me.

I lost to that sort of ill-defined guy?

Ahh, even I was surprised.

I was despairing so much just being rejected by a girl who wasn't going out with anyone yet.

I had never failed at anything before.

I had always been the best in academics and athletics from kindergarten to middle school.

...It was a public school, though.

Well, there was nothing I could do about it! If I went to a private school, the people around me would've been on a whole other level and I might've failed!

That was why I took the high school entrance exams for all my backup schools and didn't take the exam for my favored private school.

It was so I could live without having failed.

The same for my girlfriend.

She was a girl with a strange name who was a bit out of place in our year. I didn't know what she was like, but her looks were above average, and to be honest, I fell in love with her at first sight.

It might turn out to be my first taste of failure since I was born. I was prepared for that when I confessed!

But in the end, what's "I have a friend who's less than a lover" supposed to mean!? And also laughing brightly like she was really really happy!

Her cheeks flushed a bit when she said they were less than lovers!

This stupid thing was my first failure in life? My loss? My defeat?

There was no way.

I wouldn't let it be like this.

"It's over."

That was what my body told me.

It felt like my head, my hands, my legs, my tongue, my eyes, my brain, my spine, my heart, my stomach, everything, everything was laughing at me, no, like everything was angry.

I was in despair. My body had left me in despair.

"It's already over for you. You've tasted your first failure over a tiny thing!"

Even my soul cried out.

It was strange. It was just being rejected by a girl.

But it couldn't be helped.

The end. It was the end.

Damn, why, why did it turn out like this?

It was their fault. It was because of them, the one who caused me to experience such a stupid failure: Lulu, and – her less than lover, that guy called Muu.

I would kill them.

I'd kill lots of people anyway. I would kill them first.

After turning me down, Lulu had brazenly mentioned to me.

They had plans to go shopping at the electronics store and after that they would hang out at Muu's place.

An ambush.

I would ambush them and kill them both with this axe.

Their blood would open the curtains on my final fireworks.

I would become a legend.

Ahh, I didn't care if I would be a disgrace or whatever, my name would become legend.

Like I knew how many people I had to kill. Anyway, if I killed a lot more people than Stalin's Great Purge, I would make my mark on history.

This time, I would not fail.

I would definitely, definitely do it. I would kill the two who had planted that idiotic failure in my heart and make it so the failure had never happened–

Before I noticed, I was in front of the apartment building.

I had lied to the guys in my class and asked them. Was this his apartment?

...But which one?

There were two buildings lined up next to each other which looked the same, with a red roof and a blue roof.

Damn, neither one had a sign or a number displayed. But they did say he was the only one who lived in the building...

Then I realized that the window of one of the apartment rooms was open.

The room on the other side of that window was completely covered in posters of Kimari Minohara, an idol who had recently become popular.

Hmph, what a sheep. He even put posters on the ceiling, even though he was already in high school.

There was no sign of anyone living in any of the other rooms... it looked like this had to be the one.

It seemed like he hadn't gotten back yet.

Haha, then I would wait under the bed to ambush them.

I was convinced this was his room, and I carefully entered through the window.

Into the room that faced the highway in **the apartment building with the red roof**–

'Damn, there's a lot of random stuff under the bed, too. But there's no way I'm saying it's too hard.'

About ten minutes after the boy with the axe hid himself-

He moved his feet to push a box on the ground out of the way, when from the direction of the entrance, he heard the clatter of the door being unlocked.

"They're here!"

The boy stilled his body, held his breath, and observed the room with nerves on edge.

He could see only a small portion of the room from under the bed, but there wasn't really any furniture that stood out, save for the table right under the fluorescent light of the Western room and the bed he was hiding under.

The Western room had a size of about ten tatami mats, and in the space between it and the entrance, there was a slightly cramped eat-in kitchen and a door leading to the toilet and bath.

Ignoring the clutter, which was typical of a high school student, it could be said that this room really looked like the place for a murder, save for the posters.

However, the boy did not feel any shred of doubt. He did not have the luxury to doubt.

He should have already been prepared, but the closer that moment came, his various thoughts started to become more and more scrambled.

'Aren't I about to do something really stupid?

'If I really do kill those two here, isn't that exactly what it means to be depraved?'

Those thoughts also crossed the boy's mind, but he quickly denied them.

If he had felt this conflict a little earlier, he might not have done anything. However, the boy was already concealed under the bed with an axe.

It was too late. No matter how you looked at it, it was already too late.

His life on the run and his family's faces as a result surfaced in his mind – but all of that was shut into the blade of the axe.

As he hid under the bed, only the gleam of the sharp blade shone in his vision.

'That's right. I'll do it. There's no going back.'

This was not a fall from grace, nor would he lose.

I'm not crazy or anything.

I haven't fallen. I'll become someone who will never fail again–

The moment he decided that, the front door opened–

"Whew. It's hot again today, dammit."

"Makes you wanna beat someone to death, huh, Bro?"

'Eh?'

Today, the boy tasted his second failure.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

"Shit, that brat's hard to handle."

"Good job, Bro!"

The ones who appeared in the entranceway were two men he did not recognize.

One was a large man, wearing sunglasses atop a crewcut so precise it could be measured with a protractor. In addition, he was dressed in a black suit.

The one who entered as if following him was a skinhead man who looked oddly like a truck; a wound from a katana ran diagonally across his face, cutting his ear in half. In

addition, he was wearing a violet suit, giving off a feeling that could be called neither matching nor unbalanced.

To sum it up – the two who had appeared in the room were textbook examples of **men with scars on their cheeks**.

[Yakuza stereotype.]

“I didn’t just smash his front teeth in but his molars too.”

“Pretty pathetic for him to have full dentures at that age.”

“Well yeah. Nah, to begin with he can’t open his jaw, so he’ll be stuck eating liquids for a while.”

“Hahaha.”

‘–What is this?’

The boy under the bed suddenly did not understand the situation he had placed himself in.

In front of the confused boy’s eyes, the two thugs came rudely into the room.

“Tell the truth, I wanted to sink him into the Tamagawa and turn him into seal food.”

“Yeah well, let’s just leave the rest to Boss.”

“I don’t need you to tell me that. Oi, turn on the TV and air conditioning.”

“Kay.”

The skinhead’s feet moved hurriedly, followed by the sound of the TV switching being flipped. At the same time, a heavy impact ran through the bed he was hiding underneath.

The crewcut man had sat down directly above him.

The two sat in the room watching TV without taking off their jackets.

He could not see their faces from under the bed, but the skinhead had sat on the floor, so he could see everything from the chest down.

The legs of the crewcut man were right in front of his eyes. They were so close that if he breathed roughly, he would be noticed even without being heard.

'What is this!? What is this!'

The axe boy could not escape his confusion.

Could it be that that guy Muu owed a debt to loan sharks and they had come to collect?

But when he thought about their behavior and the fact that they had the key, it seemed like that was incorrect.

He could come to a simpler conclusion, but the axe boy pretended he did not realize it.

'No way, there's no way.'

'There's no way I got the wrong room!'

He had checked the room before entering. To begin with, if this apartment belonged to these delinquents, what was up with the idol posters?

When the axe boy thought about that, the skinhead called out to his superior, as if reading his mind.

"Anyway, Bro, this has been bothering me for a while... those posters, are you into that kinda thing?"

'Good question, Baldy. I kind of want to make you my spokesperson.'

When the skinhead asked shyly, the crewcut answered quietly.

"No way. You making fun of me?"

“I-I’m sorry! Then, then why...”

Flustered, the skinhead lowered his head, and after thinking for a while, the crewcut spoke slowly.

“She’s... my little sister.”

“Sister!?”

‘Sister!?’

Underneath the bed, the axe boy’s eyes widened in shock in tandem with the skinhead’s voice.

Now that he mentioned it, all of the posters on the walls were of the same girl. She was definitely that new idol, Kimari Minohara.

“Yeah... she’s always dreamed of entering showbiz... but I’m this kinda guy, a yakuza. I cut ties with her so I wouldn’t cause her trouble.”

“Bro...”

“But ya know, I didn’t really mean to cut ties with her. That’s why I thought I’d at least stick up her posters here to distract myself.”

‘That’s.’

The boy’s hands were trembling slightly, having heard the crewcut’s story.

‘Don’t stick up posters for that kind of reason! I got the room wrong thanks to that!’

He finally acknowledged the truth when he felt that misdirected, undisguised anger.

That he had mistaken the room.

‘What the hell. I thought I was turned down for a half-assed reason, and then I got the wrong room because of another half-assed reason, and now I’m in this mess!’

His anger, once lost amidst his confusion, flared up. Now once again it burned within the axe boy.

'Damn, if it's like this, I'll start by killing them! I'm the one with an axe! If I just keep hiding like this and wait until they're asleep—'

Just as he thought that, the outlaws' television began broadcasting the evening news.

"The series of axe murders—"

A different channel was playing the news the axe boy had heard earlier. The wording was different but the information was fundamentally the same.

"It's a dangerous world, huh, Bro."

"Yeah, seriously."

'Like you're ones to talk.'

He really wanted to retort, but it would be unfavorable for him to speak now. When the chance presented itself, he would take out one of the unarmed men, then the other—

As the axe boy analyzed the situation calculatingly, the crewcut man spoke up in a low voice.

"Boss's really pissed. He's doing what he wants on our turf. If we get thrown in the slammer..."

Thunk.

The unpleasant sound echoed, and beside the bed – a silver light stabbed, right in front of the axe boy's eyes.

"...we'll make him wish he were dead."

"Bro, please don't wave around a sword inside the room."

At his friend's words, the crewcut pulled out the blade of the Japanese sword which had momentarily been stabbed into the floor–

"It's my room. Where I stab a sword–"

Kashing.

In the next moment, the Japanese sword was thrust into the bed, and the blade went straight through the thin board and into the floor.

The blade appeared mere centimeters from the tip of the axe boy's nose and was reflected in his fear-filled eyes.

"Is up to me."

'This is the apartment landlord's place not yours you're welcome...'

Fear swallowed up the last words of the retort made within his heart.

I'll die.'

That was when, for the first time, he gained a clear sense of the concept of "death".

Even though it could be called the end of everything, in the end he had been focused only on killing – he had come here, obvious death had been thrust in front of his eyes, and fear of death had suddenly overtaken his heart.

"This is bad. This is bad."

I don't want to die. I really don't want to die.'

Little by little, his heart began to shake more strongly, but he could not let the shaking extend to his body.

The crewcut man was sitting above him right now and holding a Japanese sword. If he made a wrong move, not just his way of life, but his life itself would end.

Complete and total despair.

When that despair began to eat away at the boy, he regretted his actions from the bottom of his heart.

Those small failures were such trivial things, compared to losing his life.

Within the dark, narrow space, the boy, who had come here never having faced “mortal peril” and not knowing the value of his own life, fervently cursed his circumstances.

However, the boy did not yet know.

That true terror and despair lay at his feet-

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

“Oh yeah, Bro.”

“What?”

“Remember when we steamrolled those punks in the city, the stuff you got back from them... where did you put it?”

“Ah, the bang?”

‘Bang?’

Did they mean narcotics? Cannabis leaves? No way.

The axe boy tried to come to that conclusion, but the conversation between the men would not allow that.

The forceful banging of the futon being beaten was transmitted through the other side of the bed planks to the boy’s shoulder as he lay sideways in hiding.

“That stuff’s hidden under the bed.”

'-!!'

The situation had become even worse.

As sweat ran down the axe boy's back, he tightly gripped the axe in his hand.

Most likely, it was the box near his feet that was getting in his way a while ago. The moment the skinhead looked down to check, his presence would be exposed.

In that case – could he win against a Japanese sword with an axe? It was probably hopeless.

'Ah, his legs – the moment I'm found, I'll cut the legs of the guy sitting on the bed. I'll take that chance to run or I'll get rid of the both of them.'

The problem was that it would be difficult to wield an axe in this cramped space under the bed. Would he be able to inflict a wound severe enough that the victim couldn't move his legs?

The axe boy realized that his legs were trembling uncontrollably at the danger that suddenly fell upon him.

'I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I can't I can't I can't.'

Once again, the axe boy was overwhelmed by a wave of fear.

If he was seen under the bed now, unable to move, he would end up screaming pathetically.

However, without peering under the bed, the skinhead opened his eyes and cried out loudly.

"Hey... i-is that okay!? Leaving it there in this kind of summer?"

"It's fine. S'why I left it under the bed where no one will see."

"N-no, but if it explodes, it shouldn't be at our place..."

"Can't leave it with the guys either."

'...Explodes?'

Hearing that dangerous word crop up in conversation, the axe boy realized his assumption had been wrong. That is, bang wasn't referring to the narcotic, but-

'Bang... is explosives. That means...'

As he came to that conclusion, he was hit by a fear of the thing at his feet much greater than his fear of the yakuza.

'Dynamite!?'

[this is impossible impossible impossible and I gave up. The word the yakuza use is "happa", which is slang for marijuana, but can also mean "explosives". that's the boy's mistake here, but there's no word in English that really refers to both. I tried.]

There was another layer of danger to the situation he had placed himself in.

He didn't know the scale and power of the bomb, but after seeing the skinhead's reaction, it was clear that it was not just a firecracker.

As the boy gripped the axe, he felt that the world enclosing him was going to change even more.

He had the cold, heavy sensation that everything that surrounded him was related to "death".

He started to be consumed by the delusion that the narrow space under the bed where he had hidden himself would become his coffin.

'I have to escape.'

To escape from that fear, there was a different fear he had to conquer.

He would have to tightly grip the axe, extinguish his fear of the two people in front of him, and break out of this room.

That made him more nervous than he had ever been before. It was not nervousness born from fear. It was the feeling of nervousness that accompanied resolving to take action.

'I'll do it... I'll do it, I can, I can do it.'

The boy had grown used to avoiding failure and taking challenges that were beneath his capabilities, and the actions he would take from here on would clearly be a gamble with the odds stacked against him.

To put it in game terms, he was the type of person who always played on easy mode but had suddenly started on hard mode of a game he was playing for the first time.

And in that game, his life was on the line.

'I can do it, I can do it. I'll say goodbye to this bomb.'

At the moment the boy once again gripped the axe tightly-

The game difficulty suddenly spiked.

A chiming sound.

A simple “ding-dong” sounded, and the simple electronic sound echoed-

“Hello, Shibazato-san.”

“We brought the sake you asked for.”

Several men, not as stereotypical as the skinhead and the crewcut, but obviously still not respectable, all trampled in without waiting for a response.

“Yeah, come in, come in.”

“This sake’s from Boss.”

"We would've been fine... Boss always sticks his nose in."

The men seated themselves on the floor of the Western room and began to drink merrily, completely blocking the path from underneath the bed to the exit.

'There's more of them.'

That simple truth was more than powerful enough to completely crush the axe boy's initial resolution.

And so – the longest day in the boy's life continued.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

The delinquents' meager banquet unfolded as they all began to smoke.

The room was clouded white with smoke in the space of a moment, and the smell of nicotine permeated even under the bed.

As the boy desperately fought down the urge to cough, he concentrated every fiber of his being on the men.

"So, what happened with that brat?"

"Wasn't too tough, just cut his eyelids up a bit and he started bawling. Thought I'd have him shorten his finger, but..."

"Yeah, I got a suit like the one Shou Aikawa was wearing in that movie we saw cheap on the Net–"

"The way our group bleeds, crocodile's impossible... d'ya know? The belt Boss wears isn't real leather either."

"If I asked something like that he'd kill me."

"Didja know the guy who runs the bar in front of the station beat it?"

"Haven't been squeezing much from 'em lately."

[yay yakuza slang. shortening his finger: yubitsume. the movie is technically V-cinema: a film released directly to video. “bleeding” and “squeezing” are both for extorting money.]

Perhaps it was because they were becoming drunk from the sake, but the delinquents' conversations were gradually starting to drift in different directions.

Not understanding just the contents of the conversations, but also the language the men used, the boy just let his legs tremble a little as he gripped the axe.

'Why, why did it turn out like this?'

However, to put it another way, it could be said that this was his chance. At this rate, he could quietly slip out from under the bed and flee from this dangerous situation after the men got drunk.

To do so, his presence must absolutely not be discovered until the very end.

'Don't breathe, they absolutely can't figure out you're here. Nothing, become nothing.'

As he repeated this impossible wish inside his head, the boy tried with all his might to control his fear.

'No matter what, I'll get through this no matter what.'

Half of his enormous fear was due to the disrespectable people right in front of him. The other half was due to the one-way ticket to death that lay at his feet.

Inside the cardboard box that occupied one portion of the space under the bed was the bang the men had spoken of – it was packed with dynamite.

However, as time passed, his fear of the bomb lessened.

'There's nothing to panic about. It won't explode without fire.'

A while ago, he had been desperate to get even one step further away, but when he thought about it, he should be feeling more threatened by the yakuza in front of him than by the unlit bomb.

The bomb had plunged him into an unordinary situation and he had lost the ability to make rational judgments.

However – he had plunged into this unordinary situation through his own wishes.

'Calm down... at this rate, it's fine if I just hide my breathing.'

'Then everything will be decided.'

'I'll be able to get out of this room unhurt.'

As he continued repeating those positive thoughts to himself, he realized something discomfiting within the darkness.

'Huh?'

Under the bed, he could see a small light in the darkness near his feet.

'A light?'

Though he thought it ridiculous, the boy craned his neck, trying not to make a sound, and slowly directed his gaze towards his feet.

Then, when he realized the true source of that small light – he fully cursed his fate.

And that curse was immediately justified.

As the red light let off a small trail of smoke–

It began rolling vigorously toward the cardboard box containing the dynamite.

It was an ember.

It was a small, small ember.

It was a cigarette butt, not even five centimeters long, rolling in the wind from the air conditioner.

The boy did not bother to think about whose it was, and such a thing was meaningless anyway.

What mattered to him was-

There was still a smoldering red flame on the tip of that cigarette butt.

'No way.'

He knew that his heartbeat had accelerated so vigorously that, at this rate, his heart might be the first to explode.

'Why....! Something like this...!'

As he thought back on what he had done, he realized sweat was dripping down his whole body like a waterfall.

'Calm down! Calm down! It's just a cigarette butt! There's no way it would set the box on fire that easily! I might get burned, but if I just stretch my leg out and crush it-'

With those thoughts running through his head, the boy slowly began to move his leg within the darkness – and then he realized.

'Where the box meets the floor!'

The wind from the air conditioning seemed to blow there. That was why the cigarette butt was rolling in that direction.

When he looked ahead to see where the red ember would end up – piled up against the corner of the box on the floor was a collection of cotton cloths, gray with dust.

'..damn!'

By the time he realized, it was already too late, and the cigarette butt had already reached one of those cloths–

Before even a few seconds had passed, that ember had evolved into a blaze.

By the time he thought it would create smoke, the red light was already spreading.

'T-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-this is bad! This is really bad!'

If it let off more smoke, one of the delinquents might stop the explosion.

However, it meant he would be discovered at the same time.

If they didn't notice, he would die in the explosion.

He didn't know about all the delinquents, but at the very least, he would certainly die.

To save himself without being noticed, he had to extinguish the fire spreading to the cardboard box.

There was no time.

The corner of the box was already turning brown. If he didn't think of something fast, his life would definitely end.

'Not here – there's no way I'm gonna die here! Think, think! I can't stomp it out with my leg any... no, maybe it'll go out if I hit it hard, but then they'll hear the noise!'

All he could do was pour water on it.

That was the answer he immediately came up with, but of course there was no water at hand.

But – he had realized.

That there was a method.

However, he had to prepare himself, and there was great risk involved. And if he just got through that, it was clear that new problems would surface afterward.

However, he no longer had time to hesitate.

'I – I will live!'

The flames of his “resolve”, which had been crushed before, were once again lit within him.

'I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want to die!'

It was a false resolve, spurred on by and born from fear. Still, it was undoubtedly resolve.

For the first time in his life, he was prepared to be hurt. He had prepared himself to challenge an unknown stage, and he had prepared himself to accept the pain – the risks involved.

He had been broken by a single failure because he had always run away from such resolve.

However, as a result of that, the boy was about to do something he had never been able to do before.

'I, I, I – don't want to die!'

It may have been an extremely awkward reason when examined closely, but just to escape from that instinctive fear–

He held up the axe a little underneath the bed and deeply cut his own foot.

The sharp blade sent intense pain running up his foot, his spine, and his brain.

However, he could not allow himself to scream here.

He concentrated all his strength on his foot – a large quantity of blood was gushing from his wound.

Each time the vein pulsed, intense pain lanced through his body. It was only his foot that had been wounded, but it felt as if the same wound had been inflicted across his entire being.

However, he did not scream.

Everything was so he could escape–

After enduring the pain for a while, the boy slowly brought his blood-covered foot close to the cardboard box–

The burning flames were completely extinguished at last from the large quantity of the liquid called blood.

However–

He had forgotten one problem.

Hisssssss

Even if it was blood – the sound when it evaporated was no different from that of water.

Both the timbre – and the volume.

'..ah.'

“What was that? That sound just now.”

“Sounded like it was under the bed.”

'It's over.'

The delinquents stopped moving and all of them focused their attention toward the bed.

'It's all over.'

The delinquents were sitting when they looked. They shouldn't be able to see the boy's body like that. However, it was only a matter of time before they peered down.

'If this is the end, isn't it exactly the same as when it started?'

The boy's body filled with power. A power born when humans who had lost everything fell into despair... a power began to boil within him like that which he had had in the beginning, when he had bought an axe and hidden himself in this room.

'But, but it's no good, I don't want to die.'

However, what differed from the beginning was that – now his goal was only to cling stubbornly to life.

'I won't die. I don't want to die.'

"Huh? Something under the bed...?"

'I'll do anything to live!'

He swung the axe widely at exactly the same time as the crewcut man peered under the bed.

Swish

"Ah."

"Ah?"

The boy's and the crewcut's voices overlapped.

The boy had meant to jump out from under the bed, and his axe cut up the face of the crewcut man.

“Guwah!”

“B-Bro!?”

“Shibazato-san!?”

'Now there's no turning back.'

Slipping around the legs of the crewcut man, who was hugely surprised, the boy jumped out from under the bed.

“Waaaaaaaaaaah!”

Completely focused, the boy began to run toward the entrance as he swung the axe.

The men inside the room were surprised at the boy suddenly jumping out, and they crouched down to avoid the blade.

Leaping over those men, the boy ran for the entrance without stopping, opened the door from within, and fled outside.

He'd thought it would already be completely dark outside, but the sun was still just beginning to set.

However, he could not hope for anyone to save him. In his current situation, holding an axe dripping with blood, anyone he asked for help would run away immediately.

It might have been better to discard the axe, but he also recklessly thought, “If they catch up with me, I'll fight them off with this!”

And so, unable to discard the axe, he fled into the evening as fast as he could.

"Hey, waaaaait! Where'd you go?"

He could hear an angry roar.

When he looked behind him – the blood-covered man, blood streaming from his face, was holding the unsheathed sword and searching for him.

Perhaps it was because blood had clouded his vision, but it looked like he hadn't yet noticed the boy.

'I'm saved.'

The moment he thought that–

All the crewcut's companions, having put on their shoes, saw him and gave chase.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

"Dammit... where is he..."

The crewcut man, now covered in blood, walked through the twilit town with the sword dangling from his hand.

Luckily, there were no people on the street, and the only one to witness his actions was–

The boy peering outside through the window who lived in the blue-roofed apartment the next building over – only Muu Hifumi.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

How much time passed after that?

How long did I continue to run?

But it was futile.

The next thing I knew, I reached a familiar highway, and I was frozen in place, stuck between the buildings with red and blue roofs.

I couldn't run anymore.

I still had the energy to run.

Even so, my legs wouldn't listen to me.

I wanted to live. No matter how pathetic it was, right now I just wanted to escape from the terror bearing down on me.

He needed to hide himself somewhere, and so he faced the apartment premises and mustered the last of his strength.

He couldn't return to the apartment building with the red roof. He immediately entered the premises of the blue-roofed apartment building and hid himself beside the propane gas cylinder at the back of the building.

They definitely wouldn't think he was still so close by.

Thinking that, he meant to take a break and calm himself, but–

The conversation he heard from the direction of the highway brought him back into the world of fear.

“Was he there!?”

“Nah, looks like he definitely came back this way...”

‘Why!? Why are they here!?’

“Look, he’s gotta be around here!”

“Looks like that bastard’s hurt somewhere.”

Upon hearing that, the boy remembered.

He cut his own foot with the axe before.

At the same moment, he realized that his foot was throbbing with intense pain.

It wasn’t impossible to ignore the signals from his foot. It could be called a miracle that he had been able to run until now with this wound.

However, it seemed that miracle was also at an end.

They were tracking him by his trail of blood and there was nothing he could do.

'No. I don't want to die.'

Looking up at the night sky, he muttered over and over, like a stubborn child.

'I don't want to die, I don't want to die...'

Anyone is fine, I don't care if it's a god or a demon, I just want someone, anyone, to save me.

As he thought such things, the next thing he knew, he was crying like a bullied child.

Anyone is fine, someone help – if I don't call for help–

He searched for something to cling to, and the moment he looked around – he saw a pale light shining in one of the windows of the apartment building he was leaning against.

It was as if a blue flame was blazing within that room–

He didn't have the time to think about what it was. This time he could hear the voice of the crewcut man from the direction of the highway.

"...was he there?"

"Ah, Bro! You okay?"

"I'm fine. I'm asking where he is."

His tone was calm, but his voice was filled with cold bloodlust far beyond anger. Just hearing that voice, the boy's entire body froze, and at the same time he understood.

If he tried to fight back with the axe, he would definitely be killed by that man.

"Sorry, looks like he's hiding somewhere around here."

"...kill him."

'It's all over.'

And the moment the boy was completely crushed-

Guoooo0000oAaaaa00000AAAAAAaaaaaOOAawaaaAaaa000Aaaaa0000A

Out of nowhere, a shriek both human and animalistic resounded nearby.

"What's that?"

Noticing the shriek, the delinquents stopped on the highway and peered around.

And again, several seconds after that-

GuwAAAAAaaaaAAWAaaaaAAWAAA

The howl dominated the area once more as if to make known its suffering, and the violent sound of something crashing came from one of the apartment doors.

And then – with flames smoldering here and there across his body, **a man carrying an axe rushed out**, as if fleeing toward the entrance to the apartment grounds.

“GaAAah!”

That man with the axe – the serial killer raised his axe at the delinquents standing at the entrance, as if to eliminate those who stood in his way.

However, just before he could swing it down, the crewcut man took one step forward, evading the axe, and brandished the sword in his hand.

The silver color shone under the streetlights and cut deeply into the man’s right leg.

“GkaAAAaaa!?”

The moment the murderer lost his balance, the crewcut brought the sword back around and stabbed the axe man’s shoulder, bringing him down to the asphalt.

GyaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAaaaAAAaaaaaaaAAAAAAAaaaAaaaaaaaaaaaaAA
AAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaAAaaaaaaaaaaaaAAaaaaaaaaaaaaAA

The axe-wielding serial killer’s scream echoed through the night, as if to slash through the darkness.

Hearing it, the **other axe man** continued to look on from the shadow of the propane gas cylinder, as if he were trapped in a nightmare.

On and on–

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

What followed was horrific.

About five or six people ganged up on the axe man where he had collapsed. None of them held back, and occasionally the sharp sound of bones breaking reached the boy’s ears.

After a while, when the lynching ended, the crewcut man bent over expressionlessly and spoke to the serial killer, whose face was so swollen he resembled a monster.

"Bastard... you hiding under my bed before... means you heard everything we said, right? Yeah? Mister Serial Killer?"

The crewcut man addressed the killer, who was already at death's door, with eyes devoid of emotion.

"Just as promised – we'll make you wish you were dead. Don't die until then, you maggot..."

As if following up, the skinhead added something unnecessary.

"Bro, he probably heard about your sister too."

"...right, then... so the first thing we'll do – we'll start by pulling out your tongue..."

Muttering only that, the crewcut stood abruptly, and without wiping off the blood streaming down his face, turned on his heel and issued a single command to his companions. "Take him away."

The remaining men nodded mutely in response to his words, picked up the murderer, and carried him off somewhere.

Left behind were the false axe man and – a huge pool of blood at the entrance to the apartments.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

Had it been a dream?

I thought about what had happened a moment ago.

No, it couldn't have been a dream. My foot was still throbbing with pain, and no matter how long I waited, there was no sign that I would return to reality.

That meant it was the strange scene just now that had been false.

What should I do now?

When I thought that – I heard voices that sounded familiar.

I slowly peered out from the shadow of the gas cylinder – and who should I see there but Lulu Akagami and Muu Hifumi.

What the hell.

I finally ran into them in this kind of situation.

However, I no longer had the energy to kill them.

I was alive.

Right now, I was alive.

That was enough. My life was complete.

Ahh, I felt so fulfilled.

As I thought about that – those two annoyances continued talking.

“Lulu, about what you asked me earlier...”

“Eh...?”

“Lulu, I like you. Yeah, I really do.”

“Muu...”

Seriously? Confessing in front of a pool of blood?

What was with these two?

“I knew after what happened today. I really do like you, Lulu... uh, I guess this is something like a confession.”

Say something smarter. You’re under a starry sky and everything.

“Thank you... Muu... I’m sorry.”

What'll it be?

"I... like you too, Muu."

After that, the two just hugged each other.

Ugh, how stupid. The two of them really were as stupid as I thought. Even after something so unusual happened, they couldn't act any smarter.

I felt somewhat relieved as I thought that.

I see, so with this the two of them were really dating?

Which then meant I had been rejected for an actual reason. My failure today might as well have not happened.

We'll go with that. I would think of it that way.

I would start my life over again tomorrow.

I survived through today. Most everything would go well.

That's right, starting tomorrow I would begin a new life, but first-

What would I do with this axe?

As I gazed at the star-filled sky, so beautiful it was infuriating, I spaced out and thought only of that stupid problem.

I felt as if the sharp glint of the axe was quietly laughing at me.

Urban Legend" – fin.

MAGIC GIRL NUMBER 893

(GENRE "YOUNG WITCH")

魔法少女893号

・ジャンル《魔女っ娘》



Magical girls.

Lyrical and magical.

Fancy and fantastical.

“She”, who was nothing more than the product of fantasy, really did exist in that town.

A “magical girl”, who should have existed more as delusion than illusion, had truly descended upon present-day Japan.

And then-

“Ah...”

There were tears in the girl’s eyes, and at her throat was the sharp naked blade of a *nagadosu*. The magical girl’s right hand was gripping a black bomb like one that would be seen in the movies. [1]

And – there was not a hint of humor in the eyes of the experienced killer confronting her. Just from seeing the expression in the man’s eyes, it was clear that he was not a respectable person.

Lyrical and magical.

Fancy and fantastical.

Why was a magical girl, who should have had nothing to do with blood and gunpowder, confronting the yakuza?

To find the answer, we’ll turn back the stage to thirty minutes ago. Performed on that stage was-

-The magical girl's **jailbreak act**.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

Magical girls really did exist.

Within the fairytale land of magic – in prison.

“Come out, Number 893.”

A dignified voice resounded within a space about 4.5 tatami mats wide. The voice was that of a young woman, but it echoed off the surrounding walls, gaining an unspeakable pressure that bore down on the girl.

The girl called “Number 893” slowly raised herself from where she was lying in a corner of the room and shifted her attention to her surroundings. There were many lines of letters, their design geometrical and their font severe. They combined in a complex way to create an ominous, solemn sigil. Surrounded by the dark green walls on which the sigil was drawn, the girl expressionlessly looked in the direction of the voice.

“Kaaaay.” As she spoke, sounding like she was still half-asleep, the girl quietly stood up.

The girl still retained some childishness and was probably around twelve or thirteen years old. She was completely out of place in this environment. Her surroundings contained only a bed and the bare minimum of essentials. On the single door connecting the room and the outside, the same sigil as on the walls gave off a red light, turning smoothly like a shadow picture.

When the girl stood in front of the door, the light of the sigil faded, and the door swung wide open with a sound like that of an eraser being rubbed. Beyond the door were a number of men and women clad in predominantly black vestments.

The young woman in the center faced the girl and spoke in a dignified voice.
“...Prisoner Number 893.”

“Yeeeees.” The girl she spoke to answered with a wide smile devoid of nervousness.

The girl was called a prisoner, but her clothing did not look at all like a prison uniform. Her clothes were made in bright colors and looked as though they might be worn by a major supporting character in a musical. She wore glasses with a fashionable frame, and her large eyes blinked in surprise behind the lenses. She looked absolutely nothing like a prisoner, her age included. Most strikingly, the girl’s expression held no trace of guilt or nervousness. Even if she was brought forth under false charges, her bearing was much too calm. To begin with, the prison itself was a rather strange room, and it was unknown which country the letters were from, but-

-the creature that could explain such a thing suddenly showed itself from behind the prison guards.

“Ahh, so it’s finally time to part with you. Congress chose to ‘eliminate’ you. Neither you nor I can remember your name, so I’ll just call you 893-chan for now. This is ‘goodbye’, you know, that’s just how it is.”

The one making those casual comments was a green praying mantis about the size of a puppy. Even just the description of a huge praying mantis that understood human language sounded eerie, but not a single human in that place was disturbed.

However, the imprisoned girl alone let out an innocent laugh at the praying mantis’s words.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

This was the so-called land of magic.

That girl’s appearance, save for her lack of a wand, was surely that of a magical girl, often seen in Japan’s manga and anime.

Within this world, where the abnormal was commonplace, the single real abnormality was-

-that the magical girl was a prisoner.

The praying mantis, which for some reason had eyelids, blinked its large eyes with surprise as it continued speaking. “Isn’t this the seventh time you went off to the human world? Even these nice government officials will take action.”

“Why? I didn’t do anything wrong. I was just using my power for the humans’ sake.”

“...you suddenly fell out of the sky, freeloaded off people against their will, and blew up their house when you tried to kill a cockroach. We really have to do something about it this time. That’s why you became the 893rd prisoner in our country’s proud 1,500-year history. Only 893 people in 1,500 years! In other words, there’s nothing else we can do with you. Don’t you think you should reflect on your actions? Think about what that means. Okay?”

Looking slightly dissatisfied, the girl opened her mouth, but her words were drowned out by the prison guards’ cold voices. “Please refrain from speaking.”

“Okaaaay.”

Looking at the prisoner, who was looking down with her cheeks puffed out a little, the woman who appeared to be the guards’ leader let out a sigh that the others didn’t notice. The guard was somewhat disappointed by the prisoner’s obviously childish behavior.

‘Is it really this child? This child has the most pure and powerful magic in the country’s history... and is a brutal criminal?’

Rather than the strength of her magic, the guard’s doubts concerned the latter claim. She questioned the girl in front of her about her sins, as if to shake off those doubts. “...Number 893. You opened the door to the human world without authorization, concealed yourself in Tokorozawa, Saitama Prefecture, in the country of Japan, and before your concealment, used magic to destroy the dwelling place of Shinkichi Hariyama and his family... is this correct?”

“Um... I didn’t mean to?”

“I am not asking if you meant to. More important is the result: you used your ‘power’ in the human world. In addition, personally inflicting harm upon the other world is the gravest of crimes...”

“...”

The prison guard's words were filled with emotion and were not at all businesslike. The girl listened with disinterest to the charges brought against her without any particular expression on her face.

“...I do pity you, but you will be placed under Hell's jurisdiction.”

Hell. In reality, the Hell of this country was not a place full of swaggering demons and devils. It was a land universally despised by this country's inhabitants, a place said to contain illusions more frightening than death itself. That land drained away the magical power of those who lived there and stole away their vitality. It granted the bare minimum of energy needed to survive, and as it drained their magical power, they lost even the will to escape. Most of this country's “criminals” were sent there.

The incidents involving theft and assault in the human world were almost always resolved by magically erasing memories and forcing the culprits into service work, but they were not deemed “criminals”. This country's science, in the form of enormous magical power, was devoted to maintenance of the world's public order. As a result, the ones who were so restrained were usually those “criminals” who committed murder and treason.

Regardless, the fact that the girl would be treated as a criminal meant that the crimes she had committed rivaled those of a murderer.

“Throwing a child like this into “Hell”...”

Pity for the girl began to swirl beneath the guard's expressionless façade. Clutching the staff she held in her hand, the wand which acted as a magical amplification device, she quietly handed down judgment upon the girl. “–Therefore, you will now be transferred to 'Hell'. You are prepared, correct?”

In this country, those words carried the same weight as the death sentence. The girl blinked just once – and with an extremely innocent smile, she faced the prison guards and opened her mouth. “Don't wanna.”

“Huh...?”

She did not want to be sent to Hell. It was a perfectly normal reaction, but she had said so with a smile, and so those two words gave rise to a terrible sense of

unease. The other guards around her and even the praying mantis that spoke the human language gazed at the girl's face, wearing mystified expressions. And then, in just one moment.

"I don't want to go to Hell or anything." The girl's endlessly bright voice rang out, breaking her self-imposed silence.

"I said I did nothing wrong!" she announced, without the slightest hint of hesitation and with absolute confidence in her own actions.

'Nothing, she says...'

The deeds of the girl in front of her were enumerated in the prison guard's mind. She had not actually been witness to those acts, and in the end they were only written in the official documents, but – even so, that was enough to make clear the sins of the girl in front of her. Property damage, injury, obstructing the work of the magical administrators... all of this was due to her magic.

The girl had escaped the service work to atone for those sins many times. She was always in the human world when she fled. The reason for that was always that she was limited to the island country of Japan.

There were those who questioned suspiciously why she always went to the same country, even though she could speak any language with magic, but the magical barrier erected in the girl's head would not allow any to read her mind. Her ability protected against even specialized mindreaders with plenty of experience, sparking both interest and fear from the state. There was the option of forcibly altering her memories and spirit, but the state was afraid that would cause both her magical power and ability to disappear. However, that too had reached its limit.

When she set foot in the human world, rather than just stopping there, the girl's eccentricities escalated – and culminated in blowing up a house with a bomb born from her magic. Naturally, the government did not take the incident lightly, and had decided to name the girl a criminal and cast her into Hell.

'This is probably another one of their experiments. One to gauge her magical power.'

The prison guard honestly believed that as she looked at the girl's face. No matter how she looked at her, the girl in front of her did not fit the label of "brutal criminal".

However, she was about to realize she was mistaken.

The girl continued speaking, surrounded by people who were shocked and at a loss for words. "I messed up a little, right? But it's okay! I'm a princess! I'll train really hard in the human world! And I'll protect the human world from demons!"

"*Princess*"?

"*Training in the human world*"?

"*Demons*"?

"*Protect*"?

Various words spilled from the girl's mouth. However, the prison guards did not understand what she meant. There was no precedent for training in the human world, and demons existed only in the imaginations of ancient magic specialists. There should be no reason to protect the human world when cultural exchange was prohibited, and more importantly—

"What are you saying? You are simply an ordinary citizen. You are not a princess. In any case, this country has not been a monarchy—"

Having said that much, she noticed something was odd. The girl in front of her eyes was pulling together a vortex of magical power around her body as she smiled.

"...! Please stop resisting! You don't have a staff; if you use magic—"

"A staff? You're wrong." The girl held out her hand as if ridiculing the nervous guards.
"**This** is a magic wand – it's called Piriolim. I named it!"

In the next instant, the girl began to gather the "frozen air" eddying around her body in front of her hand – and like a coiled rope, it extended to the staff held by the guards.

"!?"

'She's sending magic to a staff in someone else's hand!?'

Normally, this country's so-called "magic users" gave shape to magic by sending power through a magical amplification device, the "staff" in their hands. However, even transmitting magical power through the staff clasped in one's hands required a considerable amount of concentration. The girl in front of them was sending magical power to someone else's staff not in her grasp. Furthermore, she did so with an innocent, innocent smile—

The moment she saw the girl's boundlessly pure smile, the prison guard froze in place and understood, chagrined. The one before their eyes was not simply a girl with strong magical power—

She was a full-fledged monster.

And then – in this "prison", unbefitting of a magical country, rang out the sound of an explosion, definitely unbefitting of a fairytale.

In that way, the felon who called herself a magical girl successfully escaped into the wild.

The wild – that is, into the world inhabited by non-magical humans.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

"As a result of her raw talent, she mistook herself to be a special existence... no, in truth, she really is special. Especially dangerous, that is."

The man let out a small sigh as he received the report on Number 893's jailbreak from the prison guard.

The room was narrow and rather plain, save for the spread of marble-like stones. Within, the guard who had previously been in contact with Number 893 and the warden in charge of her faced each other across a desk.

The warden in charge of the government officials administering the law in this “magical country” let out a deeper sigh than before as he skimmed over the report on Number 893.

“To think that the case of the first ‘criminal’ in my term of office would end in jailbreak. If this is how it ends, it really would’ve been better to hand her over to the researchers without a trial.”

“...I believe she would have suffered more in that case than she would by ‘going to Hell’.”

There was no longer any shred of sympathy in the voice of the guard who delivered the report. After experiencing the abnormal power of the “magical girl”, she felt only that even giving her to the researchers who treated people as guinea pigs would not have been too cruel a fate.

“Warden. Number 893... what in the world is she?”

“That’s a vague question.” The warden, whose hair was graying, tried to answer the personal question broached by his subordinate. “Number 893, whose original name has been completely erased from this world. Her parents’ whereabouts have been unknown ever since she was born, and she was raised in a facility until she was ten years old. After that, she began a solitary life due to her childish behavior, but—”

The warden stopped there and placed a number of books and videos atop the desk.

“Though she was forbidden from interacting with the human world, she managed to steal a number of everyday items like these. I don’t know if I should call her cunning or praise her for her determination... In any case, these were discovered in her room.”

The guard picked up one of the materials, but before she could check its contents, the warden opened his mouth.

“Manga and anime. She only collected those with a certain theme. They weren’t produced in this country, but in the human world. And they’re specific to the country in the human world known as Japan.”

"Owowow! Stop it! Don't squeeze my stomach it'll come out come out my insides will come out!"

The praying mantis was held tight around its abdomen, and it raised its voice in protest against the owner of the hand that restrained it. However, its voice was lost amidst the roar of the wind.

It wasn't that wind was blowing through their surroundings. The magical girl – the one called Number 893 – had grabbed hold of the praying mantis and was moving with the ferocity of wind.

Number 893 had detonated a bomb made with magic, and in the ensuing chaos, liberally used the stolen magic staff, grabbed the praying mantis that used to be her partner, and used weather manipulation magic to make her escape.

And at present–

She was in freefall.

The girl and the bug simply fell through the huge sky stretching out above the human world. She used weather manipulation magic, "recalled" the previous coordinates of her contact with the human world next to their own, and forcefully smashed through the barrier. On the other side was the sky far, far above the island country that was her destination.

Number 893 fell headfirst toward the ground. She felt as if the pressure of air resistance would tear apart her body, and that her bodily fluids were being pulled to one side with a horrible force. However, the girl put her strength into the staff in her right hand, and a transparent wall formed around her and nullified the air pressure against her body.

Noticing that the sound of the wind was lessening, the invertebrate took the opportunity and raised its voice. "Ahh, geez! What in the world are you

thinking? You're always like this! You don't think about other people at all! You always just do what you want!"

"Ah! Look, look, Tis! That's definitely a baseball stadium! Good, it looks I managed to get close to where I was last time!"

"Listen to me! Breaking out of jail is one thing, but then why'd you have to bring me along too!? Are you taking me hostage!? You felon!"

Gazing straight at the ground, Number 893 responded to the insect, which waved its sickles around with a buzzing noise as it complained. "Ehh? But doesn't a magical girl who goes to the human world need a magical creature with her? One that's noisy, and cute, and speaks the human language?"

"In that case, our country—"

"I hope my new master is a nice person."

"I said, listen to me! And what do you mean by 'master' anyway!?"

Tis seemed to be at wit's end. At his question, the magical girl declared with an innocent smile, "A magical girl has to call the owner of the roof they fall through her master."

"Where did that rule come from!? And this has been bothering me for a while, but what's a 'magical girl' supposed to be!?"

In response to the praying mantis's basic question, Number 893 bragged without an ounce of hesitation, "A magical girl is a princess from the land of magic who comes to the human world for training and fights the bad guys from Hell – that's me, see?"

"Shut up! How are you a princess!? You only ever ditched school and you didn't train or do anything else! You can only transform and use fire and materialize things! You can't heal or use normal magic at all!"

"You're wrong, Tis." The magical girl shook her head, as if they were simply having a pleasant chat as they fell headlong. "A magical girl should only use flashy magic, you know? Because no one will believe me if I don't. That's not the way it is on TV. They can't make a movie out of it."

The girl said such incomprehensible things with a far-off gaze, and the arthropod gave up on continuing the conversation.

"...I hope we at least land safely..." The praying mantis rubbed its sickles together, recalling the last time they fell, when they had nearly been dragged into the turbine of a jumbo jet.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

"It seems the human world imagines people of the 'land of magic' to be even more magnificent than we know," the warden muttered as he threw the manga he had been flipping through down on the desk. "This world, where magic can only be used to deceive."

He smiled masochistically. As he gazed at the multitude of manga and light novels, as well as anime series, he continued to speak to the prison guard in a tongue of the human world – that of the country of Japan. "To put it simply, Number 893 is a daydreamer."

"A daydreamer?"

"I don't know how she got them to start with, but... Number 893 completely fell in love with the numerous Japanese manga and images. She would read the same books over and over and over and over, everything she could get her hands on. She would keep looking, devouring it, only skimming the surface of what was going on–"

He stopped speaking for a moment and then murmured as if seeking agreement to the prison guard, who was standing erect in front of the desk, "A real 'magical girl', who can no longer tell the difference between manga and reality... huh. What a joke. Right?"

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

"By the way... why do you always, always go to Japan?" Tis asked a natural question as they drew closer to the townscape on the ground.

The girl smiled softly and answered the inquiry of her companion, whom she had forcibly dragged along. "Hey, Tis?"

"Hm?"

"It's really gross for a praying mantis to have eyelids, you know?"

"Not only did you avoid the question but you were really blunt just now! You're terrible! You're the worst!"

Even as Tis protested, they continued to accelerate and approach the ground. And then-

They fell through the roof of a certain house and she once again descended on the human world.

The "magical girl" literally did descend.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

"She thinks of herself as the protagonist of one of these works. The problem is that she really can use magic."

The warden once again let out a deep sigh as he tidied up the materials on his desk. "She was top of her class in school at pyrokinesis and materialization magic. On the other hand, in healing and mind control – or to put it bluntly, the more subdued magic – her grades are abysmal."

"It seems she didn't attend those classes to begin with... she reportedly believes 'magic has to be flashy' or something along those lines..."

At his subordinate's words, the man shook his head quietly. "If it was the other way around, we would still have her in custody. ...In the end, the manual we prepared only holds for those with equal or less magical power than us. Someone like her is really without precedent."

"Haa."

The prison guard nodded slightly at her boss's words and proposed her next question. "As for what we should do about her now..."

"Just leave her."

“Huh?”

“Most likely, the human world will reject her. Not only does she completely go against their common sense, she is someone who has fully lost sight of herself. All we have to do is observe. Her magical power will run wild again, we’ll be able to identify her exact location, and then we can go **collect** her.” The man’s expression was of mingled loss and relief, like someone whose unmanageable pet had run away and was willingly adopted by someone else.

“We’ve already decided where she will be sent, the research facility... the place might as well be ‘Hell’.”

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

The warden muttered that, and as he said, at that moment-

Number 893 really was in Hell. In this hellish situation, the girl was becoming fully aware of “death” for the first time.

She broke through the roof tiles and the ceiling with a crashing noise. And then, with the cloud of smoke as a backdrop, the lone girl twirled around grandly.

“Hello! I’ve come all the way from the land of magic! Magical Girl... umm... I don’t have a name... Anyway, the warrior of love and justice, Magical Girl Something-chan, has arrived! ☆”

Number 893 undid the barrier that had softened her fall and gave an embarrassing introduction to the person listening. However – the one before her was neither a boy confused by this sudden visit from a beautiful girl, nor a girl bewildered by the damage to her house. Moreover, he was not even an ordinary person.

“...What’s with you?”

Number 893 felt a freezing cold gaze at the same time as the calm question reached her ears.

“...huh?”

The smoke stirred up by the destruction of the roof cleared and a single man came into view. Tatami flooring, *shoji*, and *fusuma*. The man was sitting silently within the typical Japanese room. Upon seeing that man, Number 893’s exuberance ground to a temporary halt.

“You were playing with a cat on the roof... nah, doesn’t look like that at all.”

The ceiling of his room had been destroyed and a strange girl appeared in front of him – and yet the man’s voice was the picture of tranquility. However, that trivial fact was not what had stopped Number 893 in her tracks.

What was important was what the man held in his hand. A sleek, beautiful silver cylinder extended from a simple wooden handle. One side of the gleaming cylinder was slender and sharp, and it looked as if just touching it would cut anything in two.

–In short, it was a *nagadosu* nearly as large as a katana.

Furthermore, a black gun and several bullets lay to the left of the man, who was sitting in *seiza*. If they assumed the *nagadosu* was not a fake sword, most likely the gun was also not some kind of model gun.

“Ummm...”

“I asked what’s with you... get it? Mm... to begin with, Missy, are you Japanese?”

The man’s voice was not gentle, but it did not contain bloodlust or anger. Just the fact that he was so calm in this kind of situation caused Number 893 to be weighed down by a strong sense of unease.

The man was in his thirties, his age so far removed from Number 893’s that they could have been father and daughter. The glint in his eye was sharper than the long sword in his hand. He was handsome at first glance, but the long slash wound that ran across his face exerted so much pressure on the girl he faced that she was unable to reply.

“Isn’t this kind of bad?” The praying mantis, which had been thrown flat as they fell, spoke as it stepped up behind Number 893. And then, carefully so that the man in front of them wouldn’t realize, it immediately spread its wings as if to fly away.

The praying mantis's speech center had already switched over to Japanese when they were falling. Like Number 893, who had done the same as she escaped from prison, it could perfectly understand the words of the man before them and the words its partner muttered in Japanese. However, she was not able to respond immediately.

'I-I've seen this before. I've seen this before!'

She analyzed the man before her with the information she had gleaned from her collection of manga.

"This person – is a 'hoodlum'! They're scary! They're bad people!"

The girl's heart had not been shaken even when the prison guard told her she was going to Hell, but now, a little fear began to spring up within her.

The human world's manga – one part of her reality, one to which she gave even greater weight than true reality. She had read several things besides the stories of magical girls, but in those, how were people like the man before her depicted?



It might have been different in a heroic manga, but she had only been reading works targeted to young boys and girls. In those stories, those like the man in front of her were shown as frightening people about eighty percent of the time.

In other words, they were “villains”.

As if to support her thoughts, the sound of many footsteps came rushing from outside the room.

“Boss! What was that sound just now?”

“What happened!?”

The ones who opened the *fusuma* and came into view were a skinhead and a crewcut man, along with a man with a punch perm, a man wearing a Nehru jacket and a reptile leather belt, and a man wearing a flashy bracelet and a tiepin. They looked much more aggressive than man before her, whom they called “Boss”.

“Eek...”

These frightening people, “villains”, were right before her eyes. For the girl who could no longer tell the difference between reality and daydreams, they were scary both in reality and the world of her daydreams, and that was enough to throw her heart into disarray.

“Hey... B-Bro, this is...”

The friends of the man called Boss saw the girl, whose face had gone stiff, and after a moment of silence, started saying whatever they liked.

“Boss... this’s no good. Even if we really need the money, doing something like abducting brats... you’ll be kicked out if the leader finds out.”

“Boss... she your illegitimate kid?”

“What’s Sis gonna say?”

"What's with that brat? Is she gonna tape us collecting money or something and put it on the 'net?"

"So you're into this kinda thing, Boss."

Before the last man could say anything else, the man next to him struck him and he collapsed.

The girl was not stupid. She understood exactly what the aggressive-looking men were talking about. And perhaps she understood exactly what a dangerous situation she was in.

"Umm..."

"...so, what the hell's up with you?"

Faced with the "Boss", who spoke as if nothing in particular had happened, the girl was briefly at a loss for words...

"Come forth! *Lyrical Hammer!*"

Smiling and covered in cold sweat, she hoisted the staff in her hand as high as she could toward the ceiling. The sun peeked out beyond the round hole created when she herself had crashed through the roof and shone warmly upon the girl's body. Light gathered at the end of the girl's magic wand, and like a plant maturing when bathed in light – it finally took the shape of a weapon. The iron lump, thickly covered in black, was engraved with the huge white characters "666t". Of course, it was not actually that heavy, but it was a hammer of such size that it would lightly knock someone out if the girl swung it down from over her head.

The small girl held the wand under her arm and waved the hammer high in the air.

"Okay! I'll steal your memories-☆" Number 893 swung down the iron weapon with an overly theatrical yell.

Every time she came to the human world, she would erase all the harm she had done with this. When she accidentally fell into the house of a deviant, or when the panicked resident seemed like he would call the police, or as revenge against someone who wouldn't accept her. After they passed out, she would use her magic and create

appropriate false memories. Normally memory fabrication was extraordinarily difficult, but if they were unconscious, it was relatively easy.

Of course, in this case, she had no idea what would happen after one person had passed out, but at present, the girl's mind was fully occupied with escaping from the villains before her. And so, she smashed the head of the boss with a blow that would be impossible to recover from – or she should have.

Without a single change in expression, the boss stretched his hand out to the hammer, which moved with an abnormal speed born of magic, and halted the advance of the weapon right before it hit his head with a technique one would use to defend against a sword attack.

"Wha..."

He did not just stop it but skillfully redirect the momentum, and the hammer was easily thrown from the girl's hand.

The hammer fell through the tatami with a heavy *thunk*. It was clearly a weapon. As the aggressive-looking men around them realized without a doubt that it was not a toy, their expressions tensed up and Number 893 was surrounded by their piercing gazes.

"This is really bad."

The girl stood in front of Tis, who had already begun to flap his wings. She muttered as a single trickle of sweat ran down her face, "I... I have to beat them."

"Eh?"

Tis let out a questioning sound, but it no longer reached Number 893's ears. She had failed to escape, and so her heart shifted away from being a comedic magical girl. Rather than prioritizing escape from that place, her heart was urging her to act like the protagonist of a story of a magical girl fighting demons.

'I have to beat them!'

She was a magical girl. The princess of the world of magic. She had come to Earth to train and defend the human world.

'So – I have to beat them!'

All of the various stories came together in the girl's mind and charged the staff with strong magical power.

"Everyone... everyone..."

"T-That's–"

Disregarding Tis's trembling words, Number 893 manifested a single object. A rope sprang forth from the black sphere reminiscent of a bowling ball, emitting violent sparks.

"I'll blow you up!"

It was a stereotypical bomb straight out an old anime, like those she had created when exterminating cockroaches and escaping from prison.

"O-oi...?"

In an instant, the attention of the aggressive-looking men gathered at the entrance to the room focused completely on the fuse emitting violent sparks.

"What just happened..."

They did not know whether or not the bomb was real, but before that, they had seen it. The strange "miracle", when the girl created new matter out of nothing. If it had only been the hammer, they may have believed they were seeing things, but this time, everyone had clearly witnessed the bomb materializing from thin air.

The man called Boss also knitted his eyebrows for just a moment at this turn of events. However, the moment he saw the fuse, his eyes once again grew calm, and his body was already preparing for its next action.

"*Barri-*"

Number 893 tried to erect a barrier to protect her own body from the blast, but she stiffened at the overwhelming force of the man before her.

All the man did was move and wind whirled about the room.

The boss grasped the sword lying on the tatami floor, and at the same time he moved only his legs and took a huge step forward, keeping his head at about the level it was at when seated. In the next instant, his upper body began to move as if following through. The acceleration of his body was transferred to acceleration of his arm, and the tip of the blade in his hand swung so fast it gave off a sharp whistling sound.

“Huh...?”

The silver blade pressed against the girl’s slender neck the moment she poured magic into her staff.

After a short pause, the fuse of the bomb rolling in front of her plopped onto the ground. The man had aimed for a section where the flame had not yet reached and cut through the fuse with a horizontal slash. And then, without halting, he had brought the blade to a stop right at the girl’s neck.

“Ah... ah...”

Sweat of fear and despair ran down the girl’s cheeks. Incidentally, Tis had already fled somewhere, and she knew there was not a single person here who would help her.

“Missy... gunpowder’s not a kid’s toy.”

The staff was already full of magical power. If the girl concentrated just the slightest bit, she could use magic and send the man before her flying. However, right now, she couldn’t carry out that small action. The expression in the eyes of the man in front of her, his blade, and his breathing had frozen her thoughts, movements, and even her nerves.

‘He’ll kill me.’

She was the protagonist of the story. So she would definitely not die. The girl had continued to confuse reality and manga, and so she had unconsciously come to think that.

However, in this moment, she was definitely faced with “death”. A sliver of “reality” returned to her heart in this worst possible situation.

'No.'

The man kept the blade in his left hand at the girl’s throat as his right hand slowly approached Number 893’s neck.

'I don't wanna die.'

As the girl watched his hand draw closer, she knew it was the end.

'I really don't wanna die.'

Would he squeeze her neck until he killed her or rip her clothes away from the neck and rape her? Number 893 trembled in fear, her mind full of thoughts unsuited to her outward appearance. However, the approaching hand did not stop. The palm of an experienced killer drew closer, about to tear her own life away.

“Ah...”

The girl could not help letting out a cry, and tears began to well up in her eyes.

The man’s hand approached. Color began to drain from the scene in front of her. The shape of the world began to distort wildly, much like the sound of her own ragged breathing.

And the moment she completely lost sight of what was happening before her – the man's hand reached the girl's body.

"Calm down."

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaah... aaah... ah?"

However, what the man touched was not the girl's neck.

The man's hand rested on the girl's head, an action that would be drawn in with the sound effect "plop".

"...hic..."

With her tears sticking in her throat, the girl slowly opened eyes she hadn't realized she had closed.

The world that had disappeared returned to Number 893's eyes. Her distorted vision gradually cleared and the black shades regained their true colors.

When she looked at the face of the man in front of her, the look in his eyes was as pointed as ever, but the sharp light from before had vanished. The blade had been removed from her throat without her noticing, and the sensation of "death" around her was fading.

The girl slowly sank to her knees and stared back expressionlessly at the man before her eyes. The man turned away wordlessly, lifted the sword he had lowered to his side, and smoothly replaced it in its sheath.

The aggressive-looking men surrounded him at a distance and raised their voices timidly. "B-Boss... what's with this kid...?"

It was a natural question, and the boss answered indifferently without so much as raising an eyebrow. "Damn... to think those Marubatsu-gumi bastards would send in a brat as cannon fodder like this... Tch, they thought they'd catch me off-guard, but they did a pretty terrible thing."

'Huh?'

Number 893 looked on blankly, not knowing what “cannon fodder” was. She had not yet stopped sobbing, and she continued to listen to the man’s words without saying anything. Not understanding why she had been spared, she tried desperately to calm her heart so that she could make sense of the situation.

Now that Tis had run away, there was no longer anyone around who knew of her – knew of the magical girl. Somehow everything had wrapped up without her dying, but she did not know what to do now.

When she again began to feel uneasy about her fate, the boss suddenly looked back at her.

“Eek!”

Number 893 squeaked without thinking, and the boss muttered, shaking his head slightly, “Ah, it’s okay. You’re okay.”

“Um, u-um...”

“I dunno what **your parents** told you, but... a kid like you doesn’t have to be used as a weapon.”

She didn’t understand what he was talking about, but the conversation progressed steadily.

“Missy. What’s your name?”

Number 893 hesitated to answer the question that was suddenly thrown at her. It was not just that she was again seized by fear, but also because she remembered she did not have her own name.

“I... I... don’t have... a name.”

“Huh?”

“Hic...! It... it was erased... so I... don’t have one...”

It was an answer that would not make sense to those who did not know the circumstances. If she slipped up, she might be killed. The girl’s mind filled with such thoughts, and she was about to start crying again.

However, the man's reaction was completely different from what the girl had expected.

"I see... you even threw away your own name to protect your family..."

"?"

"But you don't have to go back to that family anymore."

"Eh?"

The magical girl desperately tried to figure out his intentions, not understanding the meaning of his words.

That was when the expression of the man gazing at her relaxed for the first time. Somehow, it looked to the girl as if he were smiling.

"Don't worry – there's no one here who'll drag you into a fight. I promise."

At his words, the frightening men behind him looked at each other.

"Boss, what're you gonna do?"

"Who knows. But we can't just leave her," the man answered without turning around, and the men behind him protested even more.

"But what was that... that thing, just now... with the bomb, kinda like a magic trick..."

"Like I know. It's **not important**, so just leave it for now."

"But Bro."

"Men don't chatter on and on in front of brats!"

At the boss's loud, sharp words, the men said nothing more.

Number 893 also jumped at the man's words, but seeing that, the boss hurried to speak to her gently. "Whoa, sorry. I'm not mad at you."

The boss smiled quietly and continued to speak, with his hand once again resting on the girl's head. "So – let's think about your name 'till dinner."

"Huh? Huh? –Huh?"

And so, the magical girl who had rejected Hell and escaped from prison came to live in the Amida-gumi's residence as their guest. [2]

Though no one at all bothered to ask her.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

The Amida-gumi's turf was on the outskirts of the city, and they were an extremely small organization. There was nothing around but fields. The atmosphere was completely different from the urban areas in the same city, and to begin with, it did not seem at all like a place where a yakuza residence would be located. It seemed they had been a large organization in the distant past, but next thing they knew, train stations had been built everywhere except within their territory, and the surrounding area ended up the only one excluded from the city's growth.

For generations, their bosses had been men who hated conflict. Other organizations thought there was nothing special about their territory and didn't pay them any mind.

Due to legal changes several years prior, they were no longer able to gather the protection money that had previously been their source of income. Theirs was a small, inconsequential group that just barely managed to make its living through gambling against neighborhood thugs and with the Internet business used as their front.

Thus, they had had only small skirmishes with other organizations. Time passed with no huge conflicts, but–

This past summer, that situation changed. An incident had occurred in which one of the members had been attacked by a man with an axe hiding in his room. They immediately captured the axeman, but the man was a drug addict. It seemed that the drug was distributed by the Marubatsu-gumi in the urban area.

Having learned that drugs were being distributed on their turf without their permission, the boss, Ginjima, personally went to protest. Then the Marubatsu-gumi declared war and attacked, and the boss turned the tables on them – but the feud had continued ever since. At present, the leader was laid out sick, so the Amida-gumi was currently centered around Boss Ginjima, who had taken the lead. [3]

“In the end, once we get started, it won’t end ‘till one of us is gone. There’s no big group that’ll step in and mediate between small groups like ours either. Not around here.”

The skinhead man was talking about the group’s current situation. The magical girl wore a serious expression as she listened to the bloodthirsty story.

It had been four days since the girl had fallen through the roof. In the end, Number 893 had settled in with the Amida-gumi as a freeloader.

“But ya know, Summer-chan, you came at a pretty bad time... if you want papers, someone’ll take you in for sure...”

“No. It’s fine, Masa-san. I’ve decided to do my princess training at this house!”

The gang members already knew that she was not human.

In the beginning, it had taken one day to prove that she was a “magical girl”. Most of what she could do could be rationalized as sleight of hand, and if she conducted large-scale magic, the land of magic could possibly pinpoint her location. Things would have been simple if she showed them Tis, but he had run away during the initial commotion and had not yet returned. They had finally believed her when she flew through the sky on a broom and repelled a thrown rock with a barrier – but the gang members even believed her delusion that “she was a princess of the land of magic come to the human world to train.” Most of the gang members panicked when they suddenly learned of the existence of magic, but the young boss, Ginjima, and the leader’s daughter, who they called “Sis”, somehow calmed them down.

And then – they decided her name would be “Samantha”, on the suggestion of one of the gang members, who loved *Bewitched*. Sis said, “Samantha sounds like an old

woman's name, so I'm makin' it shorter," and so Number 893 came to be called "Summer". Now, after four days had passed, the group was split between those who called her "Summer" and those who equated "summer" with "natsu" and thus called her "Nacchan". [4]

On the second day, they pressed her to prove that she had no connection to the Marubatsu-gumi, and on the third day, she did her best to persuade them to let her stay.

Initially, she had wanted to leave and search for another house, but now, Number 893 – Summer – had overcome her reluctance and wanted to stay at the Amida-gumi residence.

"If I don't stay at the first house I fall into, my training doesn't count!" the girl said, desperately pointing out a fact that existed only in her delusions. She herself believed it, and so her eyes did not show any hint of a lie.

And so, on the fourth day, during the daytime–

The girl now felt something like hero-worship towards Ginjima, who had saved her when she was terrified. She intended to use her power to help the people at the residence, no matter what. She fully believed that was the mission given to her.

When she heard the story of the conflict from the skinhead, she opened her mouth reflexively. "Okay, I'll get them!"

"Huh?"

The magical girl sat on the veranda of the residence, bathed in sunlight, her eyes shining. She wore the dazzling outfit of a magical girl, and with the skinhead beside her, she looked completely out of place.

However, the girl paid no mind to such trivialities and started sharing her own words with the skinhead. "I'll finish off those bad guys with magic!"

Her voice was brimming with confidence, but the skinhead's reaction was neither joyful nor cold. All he did was narrow his eyes slightly and answer, "We 'preciate it, but... ya know, if ya say that to Sis or Boss, you're gonna get spanked. Be careful."

"Eh... why? You know I can use magic, right? So then I'll just go *whoosh* with magic!" The magical girl spoke with dissatisfaction, as if forgetting that she had had the tables turned on her only four days ago, when she had judged Ginjima and the others to be "villains" and tried to finish them off.

The skinhead laughed, troubled, and slowly began to speak to her. "The rest of the world prob'ly thinks we're just lowlifes, but y'know... if we dragged a kid like you into our business, we wouldn't even be able to show our faces before God."

The girl's expression said that she would not be convinced otherwise, and so the skinhead tried to dodge the question. "Well, to start with, normally you wouldn't even imagine having a kid in the residence. Boss really does have a soft spot for brats."

"?"

"Y'know, Boss used to be a big shot in one of the bigger groups in the city. One of those guys who always solved things with violence, and so persistent they called 'im the 'Apparition'. He took out a group with just a gun and sword, chased 'em around until he finished 'em all off, got covered in countless people's blood... sorry, I shouldn't tell this to a girl," the skinhead said to the girl as it suddenly occurred to him. He looked away, wearing an awkward expression. "Anyway, Boss had a kid when he was 'bout twenty."

"Eh?"

"Nah, it wasn't his own kid. He took in the kid of his Sis who died... that kid died in the end too."

"....."

She could guess what came next.

"Might've been just about your age if she lived, Summer-chan. So it's pretty complicated for Bro too... nah, sorry. This ain't somethin' I should be goin' on about either. Just forget it."

The skinhead clicked his tongue, looking awkward, then stood up and left the veranda. He left behind the girl, who threw herself down heavily on the veranda and thought about what she had just heard.

'Even though magic can do anything. Maybe they still don't believe in me.'

Pondering over those things, and then feeling uneasy at her own thoughts, the girl quietly fell asleep.



Several days later.

The woman called Sis bought clothes for Number 893. Of course, it wasn't as if she had worn the same clothes for a week straight. She had borrowed casual clothing while doing laundry with magic, but today, Number 893 was given normal children's clothes suitable for a girl her age.

"You'll stick out like a sore thumb if you walk around outside looking like that."

Sis – Megumi – was a beautiful woman in Japanese clothes who appeared to be in her late twenties. She was dressed primarily in black and purple, and though the hostess at a Japanese inn would be clothed similarly, she gave off a slightly different impression. She looked severe, but she was a brave woman who ended the quarrels of her fellow group members with her precise and logical opinions.

This normally strong-willed woman smiled gently as she presented the clothes. However, the magical girl could not readily accept them. That was because she had heard of the Amida-gumi's dire financial condition from the skinhead and other group members.

"U-um... everyone in the group's short on money, so I can't just take something like this."

"Hey, it's nothing a kid should worry about."

"B-but... ah, that's right! If I use ma-"

"Even if you pull out money with magic, we won't take it. Oh, I don't think anyone will, but if one of the younger guys asks you to, you definitely can't give 'em money or anything. I'll kick you out right away if you do, so be careful."

"Eek..."

Sis had anticipated what she would say, and Number 893 hid her face. If she had been her former self back when she had lived in the land of magic, she would not have been able to understand why they would not accept it.

However, now she was beginning to understand. She couldn't really put it into words, but something about her own idea made her feel uneasy.

"T-thank you," the girl murmured quietly as she accepted the clothes.

'Is it really okay to take these clothes?

'I haven't even done anything yet. I'm just a freeloader. Is it really...'

As those small doubts began to swirl within her heart, Megumi gripped Number 893's shoulder, still smiling. "You don't need to thank me. By the way, Nacchan."

"Y-yes?"

"That good-for-nothing who told you our group's flat broke. Now who was it exactly...?"

Faced with that bright smile, the girl felt more terror than when she had first fallen into this house.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

Ten days after that.

Megumi's words weighed on Number 893's mind, and she asked the boss in the large, Japanese-style reception room, "Ginjima-san... I really am just a kid, aren't I?"

"What's this all of a sudden?"

Number 893 told Ginjima about the exchange ten days ago as he replaced the water at the altar.

“.....”

Ginjima was quiet for a while, and then he faced the altar, loudly clapped his hands twice, and turned around, letting out a large sigh. “Well, you’re still just a kid if you think we’ll be happy with money you get with magic.”

Ginjima was her current master. That was how she was starting to feel. It felt like he was denying her magic, and so Number 893 was a little saddened.

Though his gaze remained sharp, Ginjima spoke in a gentle voice, as if to comfort the girl. “Sis was thinking of you when she said that. We treat you like a kid and treasure you. You’re lucky.”

When Ginjima talked about Megumi, his voice became really happy. He didn’t at all seem like someone called the “Apparition”, but Number 893 had not asked Ginjima about his past. There wasn’t really anyone stopping her, but for some reason, she felt that it wasn’t something she should bring up. And she had heard the reason why Ginjima seemed happy from the skinhead.

“Ginjima-san, you love Megumi-san, don’t you?”

“Yeah, well.”

He did not try to hide it. Number 893 had been hoping he would be embarrassed. Even as she felt disappointed, she also respected his frank acknowledgement.

“Don’t make fun of Sis for it.”

“Does Megumi-san love you back, Ginjima-san?”

“Who knows...”

Number 893 quietly asked, in response to those evasive words, “Um, then, I’ll—”

I’ll use my magic to make her fall in love!

If she had been the same as she was just a little while ago, she would have yelled that without hesitation. But she could not speak. She felt like something had changed, and she swallowed back her own words.

Perhaps Ginjima-san noticed, because he spoke quietly. "You're still just a kid if you think of using magic to make people get married or make money."

"Ah..."

'He saw through me again.'

Everyone could figure out what she was thinking so easily. Number 893 started to suspect that they were also all magic users.

That suspicion subsided quickly, and in its place, a feeling of frustrated powerlessness welled up within her.

"Hey... Ginjima-san. Am I useless?"

"Huh? What're you talking about? You didn't do anything in the beginning, but lately you've been helping with the cleaning and laundry. Sis is pretty happy."

"But... I'm a magic user. I can do really, really amazing things...! But I still haven't done anything for you. I can't do anything except magic..."

"Can't do anything except magic, huh." Ginjima quietly narrowed his eyes, and leaning against a pillar, he turned his gaze to the ceiling. "Then it's fine. We can do magic too, you know."

"?"

Number 893 didn't understand Ginjima's meaning, and without thinking, she asked what, "to her", was a sensible question. "Um, but don't people in the human world not have magical power? So it's impossible."

"We do," Ginjima replied without hesitation and turned his gaze to the freeloading magical girl. "Listen, Summer. You didn't come to train in this world so you could use magic. I dunno anything about this land of magic, but... the reason you came all the way to Earth, where people don't use magic, is so you could learn something magic can't do, right?"

“.....”

“Well, the rest of it is your problem... Sorry. I’m talking about weird things.”

The girl could not respond to his words. A single thought simply continued to swirl within her heart.

‘*You’re wrong.*

‘*I’m, I’m-*

‘*I’m not really a princess and I didn’t come here for training.*

‘*I’m not even a magical girl...’*

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

After one month had passed since Number 893 came to the Amida-gumi, her partner suddenly returned.

Number 893 was drying the laundry in the garden and began to wave her magic wand. The clothesline, loaded with a large amount of water-soaked laundry, traced a neat line and fell onto the clothes-drying platform. After she had taken down all the clotheslines and, when she was smoothing out the wrinkles with her own hands—

Suddenly a voice spoke up from behind her.

“I-I’m back~ 893-chan...”

“...Tis!?”

When she realized who the voice belonged to, the girl panicked and picked up the praying mantis at her feet.

“Ah... you’re wearing human clothes, so I didn’t recognize you at first... but you’ve still got your magic staff, so... hehe.”

"Tis! What's wrong!? Are you okay!?" The girl spoke in a sincerely worried voice to Tis, whose eyes were rolling.

Despite the sense of discomfort the praying mantis felt at the girl's behavior, for now he gathered his energy and straightened up. "I'm fine... no, not really. I wandered around this world for a while after I ran away, but kids chased me and I was almost eaten by a dog, and when I took human form and tried to have fun in the pleasure district, I got played by the night butterflies even though I'm a praying mantis and they squeezed out all the energy and patience and money from me until I was dizzy and reeling—" [5]

As he told of the tragedy he had suffered, fully reaping the consequences of his own actions, the praying mantis silently steeled himself.

"Yeah, you must resent me after I left you and ran away, right? Haha, I thought if I was gonna have to deal with all those terrible things, I might as well come back and let you do what you want with me. But, well, to tell the truth, I didn't think you'd still be ali—"

He did not have the chance to finish speaking. Tis felt drops of something fall on his head – and in the next moment, Number 893 embraced him tightly against her chest.

"...ry."

"Huh?"

"Sorry... sorry, Tis... all I ever did was drag you along with me..."

"Eh...?"

For a while, Tis was befuddled, not understanding the words directed at him. Once he had digested their meaning, he muttered suspiciously, "You... are you really Number 893?"

"So... you know now, right? About yourself... what you are."

Number 893 nodded silently in response to the words of the praying mantis, who was sitting and resting on the veranda.

"You're not a princess, and you didn't come here to train, and you don't fight demons."

Despite Number 893's silent nod, the praying mantis continued to hound her with his words. "You know you escaped from prison and you understand what you did when you came to the human world before?"

Tears spilled from the girl's eyes, accompanied by her second nod.

"Man oh man, it's the first time I've ever seen you cry, but it looks like you really are serious. You've only spent one month in the human world, but now you can clearly tell the difference between reality and daydreams, huh? Or no, maybe it means you've finally gotten some of that 'common sense' you never had before."

The praying mantis talked on and on, doing nothing but rubbing salt in her wounds at this critical moment, but even so, the girl continued to hang her head in shame.

"...It really does look like you're reflecting on it."

The praying mantis stopped talking for a moment, and a strange silence descended.

When the girl's tears had subsided, Tis asked quietly, "What are you gonna do? From now on?"

"I don't know... I just don't know..." The magical girl shook her head slightly and began to express her feelings to the magical creature who was her companion. "I've... done a lot of terrible things... I cast magic on you, a normal praying mantis, and turned you into this, and forced you to be my partner..."

"Don't worry. I don't resent you for it **anymore**."

"...Thanks, and sorry... but no matter how much I apologize, it won't be enough... When I came to this world before, I blew away those people's house... and the 'government officials' took me back right after that, so I didn't know what happened to them..."

At that point, the girl shook her head violently. "...no! It's not that I didn't know! I didn't try to find out and I didn't care enough to find out! It didn't bother me! And even then, I didn't think I was wrong... I acted like I didn't do anything! I didn't feel anything...!"

The girl's eyes began to overflow with tears once again. The praying mantis remained silent and continued to listen to his companion's words.

"Even I know I'm completely hopeless... I ended up spending my time here, and learned lots of things, and now I know I'm hopeless."

"....."

"-But... I'm scared."

That was when fear and sadness appeared on the girl's face.

"Now I know what I did, but still... going back to the land of magic and being sent to Hell scares me. It really scares me... I'm sca... hic..."

Just as she was unable to control her tears any longer, the dam within Number 893 broke and she spoke her mind freely. "Now I'm really, really scared of being punished. I wanna run away. I can't forgive myself... for that... but I'm, really, scared... I don't, wanna go... to Hell... hic... I really, don't, wanna go..."

The girl was unable to speak any further. Only her weeping echoed across the veranda.

After some time had passed, when the girl's sobbing had abated, Tis opened his small mouth with its mandibles. "...Then, you can't use any more strong magic... so you don't get found out by people from the land of magic. Nothing more than what you use to dry laundry. You can't materialize bombs from nothing and set them off with magic like before. If you do, the government will find you right away."

"....."

The magical girl remained silent at the praying mantis's words. She was hesitant, unsure whether she could forgive herself for continuing to run away from her punishment.

And just when it seemed that the silence would stretch on forever – a dispassionate voice came from behind the girl and bug.

“Oi, Summer.”

“!”

She knew even without looking back. It was Ginjima.

The girl's heart constricted tightly.

'Did he hear? What we were talking about... all of it?'

The girl was unable to turn around, afraid of what would happen if that were the case. She could not look Ginjima in the face or in the eye.

She felt as if time and her heart had both stopped, but Ginjima continued speaking to her disinterestedly. “A while ago, you spilled soy sauce on your clothes and sent ‘em to get cleaned... they just got back.”

‘.....?’

'He didn't... hear?'

That was impossible. She had not heard the sound of someone entering the room behind them. Most likely he had been in the room since the beginning and had heard everything she and the praying mantis had said.

When she looked back unintentionally, Ginjima's sword was lying atop the tatami. It seemed as if he was in the middle of carrying out maintenance on it, just as he had been on the day Number 893 had first fallen. If that was the case, it meant he really had heard their entire conversation.

However, she was unable to confirm that. Even though she had now realized her sins, she was afraid of letting go of the “reality” she had gained in this house. Regardless of the fact that she already knew she was not the protagonist of a story, she was still afraid of losing that.

The girl was unable to answer or turn around. Ginjima quietly asked her, “How ‘bout we go for a walk?”

“Huh...?”

"No, well, you were saying 'I wanna try riding a bike' when you saw it on TV before, right? So we took the bike Sis rode when she was a kid out of storage... You can't ride if you don't practice."

She had no reason to refuse him.

Or to be more precise, she simply didn't have the willpower to refuse him-

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

Tokorozawa Aviation Memorial Park.

It was located a little ways from their residence and was the largest urban park within the city. The first airfield constructed within Japan, it was reconstructed on-site after its confiscation by the U.S. Armed Forces. It was an enormous park that boasted the largest size in Saitama Prefecture.

There was a magical girl, pushing a small bike, and a yakuza boss walking alongside as if escorting her along the promenade lined with many kinds of trees.

They were the strangest of combinations, but Number 893 was currently wearing normal children's clothes and there was nothing particularly out of place about her, save for her magic wand. It seemed the people walking down the path assumed the magic wand was a child's toy, and so they passed through without arousing anyone's suspicion.

There were a number of youths skateboarding around them, but they did not look at the girl with particular curiosity. There was a praying mantis about the size of a puppy in the bicycle's basket, but it seemed everyone believed it to be a stuffed animal.

"Okay, try riding." Ginjima spoke quietly, carrying the bag from the cleaners under one arm.

However, the girl could not just get on and ride. She didn't understand Ginjima's intentions, but on the other hand, she did not have the courage to ask about what had happened earlier. More than anything, she was afraid of talking about what Tis had said, and so there was nothing she could do.

And so the girl asked something completely different to distract herself. Though in the end, that gave her the opportunity to learn everything.

"But why'd you suddenly want to go for a walk...? Even though you haven't even gone shopping with me before, Ginjima-san..."

"Hm? Ah. Well, our fight with Marubatsu kept going 'till now... but nothing big's happened in the past month. And – there was something I wanted to tell you."

"...? What?"

At the girl's troubled inquiry, Ginjima averted his eyes slightly and muttered, "I'm getting married."

"-Eh?"

"To Sis... no, Megumi..."

For a moment, Number 893 did not understand his meaning. However, as his words sunk in, the girl smiled slowly, despite her worry. "Really!? Congratulations! Ginjima-san!"

The uneasiness had not disappeared from within her heart, but she absolutely had to smile and be happy now. The girl laughed as she gave them her blessings.

However, her smile was erased by Ginjima's next words.

"So, hey... **do you have a family** somewhere in the land of magic?"

In other words, his question meant that her lie had been exposed. Before, he had heard that she was not a princess. But conversely, that only served to calm the girl's heart. She cast down her eyes as if giving up, and without looking at Ginjima's face, she murmured faintly, "...so you heard after all."

"....."

"Are you going to kick me out? Or..."

Would she be killed? The girl recalled what had happened when they had first met. However, strangely enough, when she remembered Ginjima's eyes now, she did not feel the same strong fear as she had back then.

What about Ginjima's eyes right now, as he stood beside her? She wanted to check, but she could not summon the courage to look into his eyes.

"I'm... not a princess. My mother and father died right after I was born... so I don't have a family."

The girl answered the question, preparing herself to be struck at the very least, but she felt the same weight on her head as she had one month ago.

"Eh...?"

When she timidly raised her head, his face was as expressionless as ever.

Number 893 looked at the hand resting on her head, puzzled, and Ginjima began to speak softly. "Looks like the leader hasn't got a lot of time left... and maybe he knows it, too, so he told Megumi... I'm not used to that, let's go with Sis... Yesterday he told Sis we don't need anyone to succeed him... Our group's leadership's always been hereditary, so he was gonna declare we're dissolving... d'you know what hereditary means?"

The girl nodded silently, and Ginjina removed his hand from the girl's head and quietly began to walk down the promenade.

"Okay, good... I'll marry Sis... and I'll go straight. But when my daughter died, I ended up going down this path again..."

Hearing those words, the girl recalled the story she had heard from the skinhead.
"Ginjima-san..."

"Ah, you know, I had a daughter. I took her in after my Sis died... but my daughter died because of me. She got dragged into a fight and got hit in a drive-by shooting. ...So the only one who died was my daughter walking with me."

Number 893 could do nothing but listen to Ginjima's words as she heard his past for the first time. She could not even think of what to say to him.

"Then I left the group and got away from the city. ...but it was useless. In the end, this is the only life I know."

Ginjima's eyes narrowed as if regretting something, and he quietly sighed. His white breath swirled smoothly in the winter air.

"This time... this time too, I – I'll have a family. And that family..."

At that point, Ginjima muttered a single thing to the girl as he continued to look straight ahead. "Hey, Summer. Will you help out too?"

"Eh...?"

This time she did not understand his meaning, no matter how much she thought about it. However, the girl wore a look of confusion and waited for Ginjima's next words.

"I'm asking if we can adopt you when Sis and I get married and become husband and wife."

"...Eh?"

Ginjima's sudden proposal left the girl at a total loss for words.

"Well, we'll do something about your records... Sis likes you too. She won't be against it."

"Why..."

"You don't have anywhere to go back to, right? Ah, just so you know, I'm not saying this 'cause I feel sorry for you right now. I'll take full responsibility."

Even so, Number 893 looked puzzled. Ginjima scratched his head and spoke. "What I'm saying is Sis and I have taken a liking to you. And also–"

He averted his eyes and said as if embarrassed, "A bigger family is better, even if it's just one more person."

For a while, Number 893 was speechless.

The girl continued to push the bicycle wordlessly, and when she next opened her mouth, her eyes were slightly red.

"Thank you... thank you, Ginjima-san." After she muttered that, sounding truly happy, the girl looked extremely sad and shook her head.

"But I can't, Ginjima-san. If you heard, then you know, right? I'm—"

"Don't carry your crimes alone."

"Eh..."

"I'll take up all your crimes for you. ...I'm not saying you don't need to atone for 'em. But I can help you carry 'em a bit."

Ginjima spoke forcefully. In contrast, his next words were muttered as if speaking to himself. "...if I have that right..."

"?"

"Nah, it's nothing. ...Right, how 'bout we start by looking for that house you blew up with a bomb?"

The girl listened to everything he had to say, and this time, she was not able to hold back her tears. "Ginjima-san."

"What?"

The girl picked up Tis from the bicycle's basket, her eyes still overflowing with tears. "Can he come with me?"

Tis looked into Ginjima's eyes, surprised at suddenly being included in the conversation – and then he looked away unthinkingly at the sharpness of that gaze.

"A praying mantis, huh? Seems like his fod- food'll be expensive." It was clear that he was trying to avoid leaving a bad impression by avoiding using the word "fodder". [6]

"It's no problem! Tis is an herbivore!"

"Y-yeah, well, for now I'm vegetarian. Cucumbers and honey tastes like melon. I can live with that."

Tis averted his gaze as he answered, and Ginjima muttered in response, as expressionless as ever, "I see – if you're friends with a vegetable-eating mantis, you can brag about it **at school**, you know."

School – at that simple word, Number 893 was suddenly filled with hope. For just a moment, she forgot the crimes she had been worrying over.

Divine retribution was to fall upon her, just as if even that short moment could not be forgiven. However, was the punishment meant for her or for Ginjima?

The sound of a skateboard echoed and a light shock ran through Ginjima's back.

"Ah, sorry!"

It was a boy wearing a blue knit hat low over his eyes. He bowed his head quickly and leisurely descended down the hilly road.

"Be careful."

Ginjima did not seem particularly angry and only glanced at the boy's back, but–

He noticed a sudden strange feeling in his back, and when he reached over with his right hand – he felt a hot pulse on his hand and back simultaneously.

"Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Number 893 screamed, and the bag from the cleaners that Ginjima had been clutching in his left hand fell to the ground.

When Ginjima looked at his right hand, there was a deep, red liquid clinging to his palm.

At that moment – they once again heard the sound of a skateboard behind them.

"Oh man! It really is Ginjima! Did we really hit the jackpot?"

When Ginjima and Number 893 turned around, there was a youth standing straight atop the skateboard, a boy wearing a red hat of a different color than the one before. He was holding a small black something in his hand and drawing closer to them.

“Left the residence with a brat, just like the info said... yahoo!”

Number 893 realized the object was a gun – and without thinking, she stood in front of Ginjima to cover him.

The boy atop the skateboard looked troubled for just a moment, but he continued to grip the gun barrel tightly.

‘It’s all right, I’ll protect you!’

It was a magic she had not used in a while, but the girl’s body remembered perfectly how to cast it. She meant to use the magical power that enveloped her body to form a wall of air in front of her.

‘I’ll protect you! Ginjima-san, I’ll–’

“*Barri-*”

At that moment, a shadow stood in front of the girl.

The girl thought his back was broad.

Why was she thinking of that in such a tense situation?

However, when she realized that back was stained with red–

And then when Ginjima’s body shook slightly with the impact of the bullet–

The powerless witch let out a loud, loud scream.

“No, no! Ginjima-san! Hold on! You can’t die!”

The girl’s small body was huddled up at the fallen man’s side.

The would-be killers on skateboards were already gone. There was nothing around save for the trees growing thickly at the side of the road.

If she climbed one of the fences, she would find National Highway 465 on the other side. If she went a little farther down the road, she would find one of the park shops. However, there were no pedestrians to be seen, and only the girl’s sobs echoed through the park.

“Why!? Why... even though you knew I really can use magic, even though you knew I could stop that bullet! Why, why!?”

In response to her cries, Ginjima quietly opened his mouth. It seemed they had missed his vitals and his lungs and he could still speak. However, his condition was still quite serious.

Ginjima was badly injured, but he slowly wrung out his words as Number 893 cried. “Yeah... sorry... I remembered when my daughter died, and I moved in front of you without thinking...”

“That’s...”

“And I promised... right? That there’s... no one in our group who’ll drag you into a fight... No matter what... kind of amazing magic you can use... you’re still a kid...”

“Ginjima-san...”

Her tears fell behind her glasses and she could not see clearly.

And then – only Tis, at a loss for words beside her, noticed that Ginjima was smiling faintly.

“Ah, this... is my punishment, huh... I hurt lots of people in the past and still tried to have a normal kinda happiness, to be with you and Sis, so I got punished like this. Haha...”

He was trying to act strong, but Ginjima's voice was gradually growing weaker.

"Don't talk! Ginjima-san, you told me! Men don't chatter on and on in front of kids! So Ginjima-san, you have to stay quiet..."

"Haha... you're right... I was just complaining pitifully... 'bout the things I've done..."

As he laughed masochistically, Ginjima gazed directly at the girl's face. "Sorry... looks like I wasn't worthy of helpin' you atone after all."

"That's not true! So, so! You shouldn't – you shouldn't talk anymore! The blood, the blood is..."

The girl was at a loss for words. Ginjima extended his hand and wiped the tears from her face.

"Don't cry... It was stupid of me to choose this path in the first place... I was ready to die like this... so... you don't... need... to... cry..."

There, his words came to a stop. He was still breathing faintly, but the bloodstain was spreading endlessly over the front of his clothes.

"No... no..."

As she cried, the magical girl pointed her magic wand at Ginjima.



"893-chan, what're you going to do?" Tis asked timidly, but the girl did not hear him.

"I'm not ready at all!"

The end of the staff gave off light, which enveloped Ginjima's body.

"You're the only one ready for this, Ginjima-san... I'm not ready for you to die like this at all! So, so..."

He was wrapped in more and more light. The gentle light shone on their surroundings, and the miraculous sight expanded.

-However, that was all.

Ginjima was only wrapped in light. His wounds did not heal at all, and his face remained ashen.

"Please... please... please!"

"It's impossible..."

"It's not impossible! Please, please please, please, please, please..."

"Healing magic isn't the kind of magic you can use just by wishing. You definitely can't do it if you don't know the basics," Tis said from behind her. Even so, the girl did not stop her input of magical power.

However, as expected, Ginjima did not miraculously recover his strength and stand.

'Why? Why can't I use healing magic?'

In answer to her own question, she remembered that it was all her own fault.

She hated it. She hated herself.

If she could use time manipulation magic, she could return to the past right now and hit her old self, when she had wanted to learn every single kind of offensive magic. And then right now, she would–

But there was no magic that could manipulate time. If it really did exist, she would go back to the moment Ginjima was stabbed.

She poured all of her magic into the man in front of her as she dwelled on those thoughts. However, futile effort could only end in futility.

“It’s different... This kind of thing didn’t happen in the manga I read...”

That was when the girl truly realized something she would have been happier not knowing.

That this was truly, truly, reality.

“That’s right, it’s definitely because I’m not wearing magic clothes... that’s why it’s not working...”

And now, even her reality was crumbling. The “reality” she had obtained, the “reality” separate from delusions, was crashing down around her.

In truth, her clothes had no effect, but even so, the girl had no choice but to believe that. She waved her magic wand slightly, and her clothes were immediately swapped with those in the cleaners’ bag.

Please. Just this once. Just this once is fine.

‘M-Make me the protagonist of a story. Make me a real magical girl-’

Even she did not know to whom she was praying. She simply continued to pour in power.

However, in the end she proceeded straight down the path of the tragic hero.

The blood did not stop seeping from his suit to the ground, and she knew Ginjima’s breathing was gradually growing weaker.

“Help... someone... someone...”

"Ahhh, we don't know where a doctor might be around here. R-Right, maybe we should try calling someone..."

The moment Tis spoke, the light in front of her vanished. It was not that the girl was giving up, but rather that she had run out of magical power completely.

She shot to her feet and started running down the path.

'Please, someone, anyone is fine-'

In any case, the magical girl ran in search of other people.

Even if she met someone, she did not know if they would take her words seriously, dressed as she was. She understood that full well herself.

But still she ran.

Without giving up on a miracle, looking for a person-

She ran in the opposite direction of the store, and there, she finally met a miracle.

She caught sight of someone who seemed to be taking a stroll and called out in a loud voice as she rushed toward them. "Um, please—"

Then Number 893 froze.

"You're..."

The glasses-wearing man had the kind of face that no one would hate or even resent. When it got down to it, it was an "endearing face", an expression without a hint of disagreeableness. Besides the glasses, there was nothing about his face that stood out in particular. However, the girl clearly remembered that quality of "endearing".

It was the face of the master of the house she had blown to bits with a bomb one and a half months ago.

"Hariyama... san..."

Was this her crime?

Was this her punishment?

This time, shadows of despair began to stretch across her heart.

Ever since she had realized her own crimes, he had been the person she had absolutely not wanted to see, the person she absolutely had to make amends to – and of all people, he had appeared, with the worst possible timing.

“Ah... aah...”

She felt all the strength immediately escape her body. Everything that had supported her, both reality and delusions, crumbled and vanished. The “magical girl” who gave hope to people. She was clad in those garments and was a real magic-user, but she herself was driven to the brink of despair.

‘It’s no good.’

Until now, her heart had just barely managed to endure, but now it broke completely.

‘This is the end.’

Her knees were shaking, and she leaned forward as if about to sink to her knees. At that moment–

“Hariyama-san” spoke in a clear voice.

“I’m glad...”

“...?”

Her legs stopped just as she was about to collapse.

“So you were okay! That’s great!”

“Eh...”

The girl could not believe her ears, and she stared up at the man before her.

There was not a shred of anger in his expression. He was gazing at Number 893 with nothing but heartfelt relief.

“I’m glad... Well, after that explosion, we couldn’t find you anywhere in the wreckage of the house... We didn’t know if you’d been blown apart by the bomb. My daughter and son were really worried. My wife was sobbing too... No, but it’s really great. It’s great that you’re okay. Yeah.”

It may have been her imagination, but it looked like his eyes were slightly damp. Most likely, he too had been worried about her.

‘I have no right to take advantage of his kindness. But—’

“Hariyama-san... I’m sorry... I...”

The girl faced the man in front of her, cursing her own shameful actions.

“Ah, it’s fine, it’s fine. If you’re talking about my house, we had insurance, and no one in my family was hurt... More importantly, I’m really glad you’re oka...”

That was as far as Hariyama-san got before he stopped speaking. He realized that there was a strange atmosphere about the girl.

“Please... help.”

‘Right now, I want to depend on his kindness. I want to use him.’

“Please... Ginjima-san... please help Ginjima-san—”

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

“Wow, it’s a really good thing there was a hospital nearby.”

The university hospital near the park. Hariyama-san laughed quietly in front of the emergency room entrance.

After that, the girl had ridden the ambulance that immediately arrived and had come to this hospital. Dressed like a magical girl, the girl stood out like a sore thumb in the huge, towering hospital, but faced with seriously injured people, the doctors and EMTs paid no mind to her clothes. Therefore, the first time anyone looked at her strangely was after the doctor told her, "His life isn't in danger."

It would have been dangerous had he lost a bit more blood, but it seemed he had retained more blood inside his body than she had thought. Her magic had not been able to heal his wound, and so it seemed it had been her telekinesis that had pushed at the mouth of the wound and lessened the blood flow.

"Yeah, anyway, that's really great," Hariyama-san said as if truly relieved.

Ginjima was a total stranger to him, but Hariyama-san seemed to be truly overjoyed that Ginjima would not lose his life.

"Right, right, I left your bicycle at the edge of the bike parking lot. Here's the key."

After Number 893 had ridden the ambulance, he had picked up the bicycle in his RV and had gone out of his way to bring it to this hospital.

"T-thank you!"

Number 893's smile was still somewhat awkward. On top of committing the crime of destroying his house, she now owed him a lot for this.

As she thought about repaying him, even if it would take her whole life, one of the doctors stepped out and inquired about Ginjima's family. When she looked around, there were police officers in the hospital. It was an injury caused by a gun, so most likely they would take statements from each member of the Amida-gumi, starting with Ginjima himself. Naturally, they would ask questions of Number 893 as well.

"Ah, y-yes! I'll call them!" the girl said, flustered. She went to the pay phone inside the hospital and dialed the number of the Amida-gumi's residence.

"Yes, who is this?"

The voice on the other end was familiar. It was the crewcut man, Shibazato, who the skinhead called Bro.

"Shibazato-san... It's me, Summer."

She hesitated, unsure how to bring up what had happened to Ginjima-san. A bright voice answered on the other end of the line. "Oh, Missy? Good timing."

"Eh?"

"We've got visitors for you."

"Eh? Eh?"

'Visitors for me?'

She had absolutely no idea whom they could be. Shibazato casually insulted them, and his words came as a shock to the confused girl. "They're wearing kinda weird clothes and keep going on and on about stuff I don't get, like collecting Number 893. But it's gotta be them, right? Guys from the land of magic?"

"_-!"

Shocked, she slammed down the receiver without thinking.

'Why-'

After only a moment of thought, she easily arrived at the answer.

Right after Ginjima had been shot, she had poured all of her magical power into healing. Though the healing had not worked at all, the magical power released had far exceeded that of the bomb which blew up Hariyama-san's house. If they had been observing her even now, after one month had passed, it would have been stranger if they hadn't noticed. However, why had they gone to the residence?

The answer to that question also came to her immediately.

"That's right... where's Tis?"

He should have been with her, watching over Ginjima. But when the girl realized he hadn't been there when they called the ambulance, she was again seized by a deep, deep despair.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

Using the tiny amount of magical power she had recovered, the magical girl – rode a bike.

She was riding a bike for the first time without any assistance. She managed to balance herself by using the same tricks as when she rode a broom and flew through the sky.

It was a solution that used the power of magic rather than the body's muscles. Unfortunately, she had not recovered enough power to levitate herself and a broom, and so she did her very best to balance the center of gravity of the bike. Moreover, she traveled while clutching her wand in her right hand, and so riding normally would have been extremely dangerous.

Then all she had to do was pedal and she could move just like a person used to riding. Every time she ran over a rock or bump, she was thrown off balance by the sensation she did not experience on a broom. Even so, she did not stop.

When she left the hospital, she quickly bowed her head just once to Hariyama-san, then rode her own bike and pedaled as fast as she could toward the Amida-gumi residence.

Tis had most likely been kidnapped.

Before, she had felt no fear when faced with those government officials. Not when they ordered that she be sent to Hell, and not even when she broke out of prison. However, now she was so scared she couldn't stand it.

The last time they had brought her back, the government officials who had come from the land of magic had shown absolutely no interest in the house she had blown up nor the people who lived there. And then, their main reason for declaring her a criminal was not because she caused damage to part of the human world. It was because "You used magic strong enough to cause such damage."

From the very beginning, they had not cared about humans at all. Regardless of whether humans lived or died, all they feared was the human world “interfering” in the land of magic as a result.

That was why – Number 893 was scared. She feared for herself, as well as the people she had interacted with in the course of the last month, each member of the Amida-gumi. What in the world would happen to them if the government officials deemed that they had been “strongly influenced by magic”?

Would their memories be erased? If that was all, it would be fine. It would be extremely sad for her, but it was far from the worst thing that could happen.

If they were not satisfied simply with erasing memories and instead decided to completely erase everything connected to her–

If they erased her existence itself, just like how they had stolen away her name and replaced it with “Number 893”–

As she pedaled the bike, the girl refused to think on it any further.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

“How surprising. I didn’t think you’d come back.”

When Number 893 arrived in front of the residence, a man in a black business suit came out to meet her, wearing a surprised expression.

She did not recognize the man, but she did remember the numerous women behind him. They were the guards present when she had broken out of prison. In other words, the man in the suit was most likely also someone connected to the land of magic.

“I thought you’d run far away once you found out we were here... or is it that you’re currently playing the role of a protagonist who ‘can make us understand everything if we just talk it over’?”

The man spoke sarcastically, and the girl immediately felt disgust. It was the first time in her whole life she had felt so repulsed.

The guards behind the man all wore the same clothes as they had in the land of magic. Only the man was clad in a black suit.

“Who... are you?”

At the girl’s question, the man made a surprised gesture and spoke. “I showed up at your trial... Oh, it’s possible you just don’t recognize me in these clothes.”

Hearing that, the girl finally remembered his voice. “Warden...”

She spoke the title of the person who was in charge of the prison guards, and the man muttered in a disappointed tone.

“I’d prefer it if you at least remembered my name, but, well, it won’t be necessary to give it to you again.” He said those loaded words, then adjusted the lapels of his suit as if showing off. “Well? This suit is a top-quality article I bought at a nearby store.”

“Excuse me, but where did you get the money...?” Number 893 spoke politely with some reluctance. She could see through the gate behind them, but no one was coming out. She decided it would be best to listen to what they had to say if she wanted to secure the safety of the Amida-gumi members.

“Hm? How strange. You can make as much money as you need with magic.”

“...but in that case, couldn’t you make the clothes with magic too?”

Number 893 made a sound argument, and in response, the warden laughed and refuted it. “Don’t be ridiculous. It feels better wearing the ‘genuine article’. The material is completely different from that of a fake made with magic. Right, it matters exactly because it’s the natural product.”

For some reason, each and every one of the warden’s words bothered her. Number 893 clutched her wand anxiously and asked something important. “...where is Tis?”

At her inquiry, the warden sent a fleeting look behind him. The guard woman he glanced at nodded expressionlessly and produced Tis from within her sleeve, as if by a conjuring trick.

“.....!”

Tis was thrown to the ground. It was clear from a glance that he had been cruelly treated. Several of his legs were bent in odd places. His exoskeleton was split and his muscles showed through. His wings were completely tattered, and one of his outer wings clearly showed the impression of a footprint.

“Tis...!”

Perhaps he had completely lost consciousness. He did not respond to Number 893’s cry.

The girl immediately ran to the praying mantis, fell to her knees, and picked him up. The warden looked down at her as he dispassionately told her what had happened to Tis. “We merely asked where you were hiding. He kept silent, so we roughed him up a bit. Even after that he wouldn’t talk. In the end, we used magic to read his mind.”

“What... why!? If you used magic and read his mind to begin with, you wouldn’t have had to do this...!”

“Our magical power is precious, unlike yours.”

A strong anger flared within her at the warden’s words, but at the same time, Number 893 felt an indefinable sense of unease. She felt like this man had been provoking her more than necessary for a while now. Most likely that was because she was a criminal.

However, she couldn’t help but feel that was not the case. To begin with, why was the warden himself coming to take away someone like her? A number of questions arose within her, but now that she had confirmed Tis’s condition, she was worried about the Amida-gumi.

“What happened... to everyone in the house?”

The guards exchanged glances at her timid words, and the warden opened his mouth and spoke as if he found the subject tiresome. “Yeah. Everyone’s sleeping inside. But I felt like there were rather a lot of people for a private house.”

Number 893 felt momentarily relieved at his reply. It seemed everyone was fine for now.

“...Relax. You thought we would erase their memories and your existence, right? I’ll say this now, but erasing memories and existences uses up more magical power than

you think. It was a pretty big deal when we erased your name." He began complaining about his hardships, but finally he pulled a book of matches from his pocket, as if an idea had suddenly struck him. "But, well – if we just want to erase the evidence, all we have to do is burn everyone in this house to death."

Number 893 felt the blood drain from her face when she heard those dispassionate words. If they were in a magic-induced sleep, it would be impossible to wake them until after a certain amount of time had passed. Even if a single match started a fire-

"Stop!"

She raised her voice without thinking and realized she was covered in an unbelievable amount of cold sweat. "...please. I'll go quietly to Hell or wherever, so, so, please leave everyone alone...!" the girl pled, looking as if she were about to cry.

In response, the warden shook his head with a bright smile. "Ah... it's fine. There's no longer any need for you to go to 'Hell'."

Number 893 looked suspiciously at the warden after his strange remark. As expected, there was no hint of sympathy in the eyes of the prison guards standing behind the man – but even so, she felt like their gazes were strangely cold. It was like they were looking at a broken-down machine or a spoiled cake rather than a criminal.

Just when her unease began turning into fear, the warden stopped smiling and told her the meaning behind the guards' expressions. "You are no longer Prisoner Number 893."

".....?"

"Two weeks ago, we registered the prisoner formally designated as Number 893. We already sent her to Hell a while ago. Her charges were – well, one was falsifying records... **that a couple who had already died had had a child.**"

The girl was completely unable to understand the implication of the warden's words.

Ever since she came here, there had been many times she had been unable to understand other people's intentions, but it was the first time this had happened with a fellow resident of the land of magic.

"I thought it was strange. That mental predisposition, where you easily confuse reality and manga... there are people like that in the human world, but you're rather unusual."

It seemed he was talking about her. But then what was her relationship with the "new Number 893"?

"All you did was read a few books and you started thinking of yourself as one of those protagonists. It shouldn't have had that much of an effect on you... so then the guys in the research lab did their own investigation."

"What... are you talking about?"

"We rely on magic for medicine. But we might've figured it out right away if we looked at DNA or something like they do in the human world."

She really didn't understand what he was saying.

No, she could take a guess. However, it felt as if her body refused to think of the answer, and that uneasiness filled the ex-Number 893's whole being.

Perhaps satisfied at seeing her turmoil, the warden prompted one of the guards behind him to report on the truth. The guardswoman nodded expressionlessly, faced the girl, and delivered the words that were like a death sentence.

"I'll begin with the conclusion. Prisoner Number 893... no such citizen existed from the very beginning. Therefore, Prisoner Number 893 was temporarily stripped of a number..."

After a moment's pause, the woman spoke without a hint of compassion or hesitation.

"In exchange, **the magic user who created you** – the real 893rd criminal was imprisoned."

"Eh..."

Something invisible had a tight grip on the girl's heart.

“What... do... you mean?”

That was what her mouth asked, but in truth, she already knew what they meant.

It was just that she did not want to accept it.

She did not want to accept the truth: that she did not physically exist.

And at the same time, she also understood.

She understood the meaning of the unease she had felt for a while now at the warden’s conduct.

Wearing a suit that had not been created with magic – that was not because he was boasting. He had done it **to mock** the girl.

“It is what it is. The magic user we sent to Hell amused herself in the name of research. She made a child just like you made a bomb, changing magical power into matter, flesh and blood and bones.”

“...ah...”

“That magic user picked a couple that happened to die in an accident and made it so they’d actually had a child.” She spoke matter-of-factly, but her words held deep meaning.

“And so she gave you records in our country, you who are nothing more than a fake created with magic.” The man added to the guard’s words and continued to elaborate on the truth at length. “You are actually an existence born from a complicated composition magic. To have stronger magical power than anyone, in exchange for an easily swayed heart particularly susceptible to outside influence.”

“No...”

“You are nothing more than an existence artificially composed of magic. Just like the bomb you created to blow up a house in the human world, or like a magical flame that disappears in an instant–”

“No...”

She did not want to accept the truth. She fell to her knees and covered her ears, wanting to escape from reality.

However, the warden spoke directly into the girl's mind with magic. They would not allow her to run from the reality known as truth. And so – neither would they allow her to transform into the protagonist of her delusions.

"You reading manga from the human world – that was all part of Number 893's scheme. I don't mean you, but **the current** Number 893."

"No... ooo, ohhhh..."

The girl broke down crying in wordless grief at the mansion's gate.

"You are not a 'magical girl'."

The reason for her tears was not sorrow, but pure despair.

"You are – nothing more than 'magic'."

"Nooooooooooooooo... ahhh.... ah... ahhh..."

The girl's voice was raised, but it was unclear whether she was sobbing or screaming. She herself had not realized, but she could no longer feel the magical power that had been returning to her body.

Seeing that, the warden hid his cold sweat and muttered quietly, "Just as the researchers thought. Its mental state is easily influenced... even just a verbal attack works well."

The guards looked at each other and smiled in relief, taking care that the girl did not notice.

"The best way to steal magical power from this 'magic' is to make it despair... haha, there was a chance it would struggle and resist, but it's really just bawling its eyes out." The warden reconfirmed that they held the high ground and smiled again.

"Well then... you won't be going to Hell, but you'll be placed under the supervision of the research institute. In any case, our country doesn't have a way to persecute 'magic' itself. On the other hand, there's no way to defend it either." As he spoke sarcastically, the warden's gaze swept across the guards and he gave them a signal.

The guardswomen nodded in response and moved to restrain the girl.

The girl was weeping in despair. The praying mantis was still unconscious and the members of the Amida-gumi were still sleeping within the residence.

'There's no one who will save her anymore. That means coming all the way here was worth it. ...And I bought some nice clothes.'

The warden smiled from the bottom of his heart as he thought that.

At that moment-

"Stop right there!"

A powerful voice echoed through the residence.

"Bastards... what're ya doin' **with my daughter?** Huh? You... punks!"

The moment that yell rang out, the girl, who had broken down in tears, suddenly stopped weeping.

The guards froze, their expressions uncomprehending, and looked in the direction of the voice's owner.

And then – the ex-Number 893 also turned to look in the direction of the voice, her eyes full of trust.

And then – the girl's wish became reality.

"Ginjima... san... Ginjima-san!"

The person before the girl's eyes was undoubtedly the boss, Ginjima himself.

There were bloodstained bandages wrapped around his stomach. Though there seemed to be no external wounds anywhere else, the man's face was as ashen as if he was covered in injuries, but he was definitely standing there.

"What's with you?"

The warden eyed him suspiciously, but Ginjima completely ignored him.

He walked to the girl's side and gripped her shoulder tightly. "You okay...?"

In response, the girl's face crumpled, and she replied, "That's my line, Ginjima-saaaaan..."

The girl's expression lit up with happiness, and she hugged Ginjima tightly. However, the smell of the hospital and the smell of blood lingered around Ginjima's stomach, and that made the girl uneasy once again.

"Ginjima-san... why aren't you at the hospital?"

"Yeah, I saw the police when I was getting a blood transfusion. Figured there'd be trouble, so I used some dirty tricks and snuck out. ...then I ran into this four-eyes guy who said he helped me. He told me the look on your face changed after you called the group, and you ran off... he drove me here right away."

When he had finished talking about his astounding actions, Ginjima inhaled quietly... and spoke to the girl before him. "Yeah... I heard most of it, walking down the fence."

The girl flinched at his words. "Ginjima-san, I... I... I'm not human... or a resident of the country of magic..."

The girl was terrified of acknowledging the truth of her own existence, but her trust in Ginjima surpassed that fear. "I'm... just a lump of... magic..."

"Don't worry. Even I'm just a lump of meat." Without waiting for her to finish, Ginjima declared with a grin, "Doesn't matter if you're a robot or what. You've got spirit in you."

Then, facing the dumbfounded warden and guards, he spat out in a low voice, “But... far as I can see, those guys’ve got no spirit. Not even a bit.”

Not just the girl, but also the warden and guards, were at a loss for words at his unusually blunt proclamation.

“Bastards... didja think you’d just go back to your ‘land of magic’ without a scratch on you?”

The warden and guards stiffened at the sound of his voice. There was definitely power in the man’s voice. He would make his words into reality.

“Don’t worry. I’m not gonna hand you over to this scum.”

Those words were also full of power. The girl’s heart was relieved, as if magic had been cast on her.

“I told you, right? Humans can use magic too... I’ll prove it to you now.”

“Magic? Ha! Don’t be foolish! Humans like you have no magical power! You don’t even have a staff! As if someone like you can use magic!” The warden scoffed at Ginjima’s words.

“...so?”

“Ugh...”

The warden’s words had been intended to turn the situation in his favor, but Ginjima did not waver in the slightest.

“Maybe I haven’t got any of this magical power shit.”

“Wha...”

“Maybe I don’t – but I’ve got spirit.”

His body was completely white, not having completed the blood transfusion, and his steps were shaky.

“Cause I’m the ‘Apparition’. Spirit’s the only thing I’ve got.”

Even though he looked as if he would fall over at the slightest touch – the warden and guards did not feel as if they could win against the man in front of them. He should have been a man they could easily blow away with magic, but for some reason, they could not imagine themselves invoking that magic.

"Hey... wait, if you heard then you know, right!? That girl isn't even a living creature!"

"...so?"

"Maybe you're attached to it now, but that's because of the properties of that 'magic'. It's just influenced and affected by you! Get it? That thing's a doll. If it leaves you for even a little while, it'll be influenced by someone else. That's the way it is!"

Ginjima smiled quietly at the warden's speech. "I won't let her leave. At least not 'till she finds someone who'll take her as their bride."

By the time they noticed, Ginjima was already only three steps away from the warden. If they all used magic at the same time, it might still be possible to repel him. However, the first person to use magic would surely be killed. With that thought in mind, they were unable to recklessly use magic.

"Ginjima-san." The girl spoke up from behind Ginjima as if to topple that balance. "I'll... help too."

"How many times have I gotta say it? I'm not gonna use a brat–"

This time, the girl's voice overrode Ginjima's forceful words. "Because this is my fight too...!"

They were powerful words.

Up until a little while ago, the girl's magical power had been disappearing, but as she spoke, it enveloped her in a vortex, having fully recovered.

"...oh well..."

He could not see the vortex of magical power, but Ginjima caught a glimpse of the girl's eyes and said only one thing. "Then... **use your magic and get my magic wand.**"

"!?"

The warden and guards could not comprehend the meaning of the man's words.

However – the girl understood.

The ex-Number 893 immediately understood Ginjima's words, and she poured magic into her own staff faster than anyone else ever could.

"-!"

The warden's group simultaneously went on guard, but the light emitted by the girl's wand did not hit anyone there. It passed through the garden and scored a direct hit on something in the room off the veranda–

In the next moment, a silver cylinder came flying and stopped right above Ginjima. He tightly grasped the hilt of that spinning cylinder, and with a fearless smile, said:

"This – is my magic wand."

With his *nagadosu* at the ready, Ginjima grinned broadly and leapt straight at the warden's group.

The silver lightning flashed, faster than anyone.

Faster than sound, faster than the wind,

Like magic, like magic–

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

"Ginjima-san... I..."

After everything was over, Ginjima and the ex-Number 893 sat on the veranda and waited for the rest of the Amida-gumi to wake up. It seemed that Tis was also slowly recovering from his wounds, and they were able to confirm that his breathing was evening out.

As the girl breathed a sigh of relief, she recalled the events that had occurred a little while ago.

Ginjima immediately **cut straight through every one of the guards' magic staffs** with his *nagadosu*.

Now completely unable to use magic, they fled as fast as they could. However, they were unable to return to the land of magic without their staffs, and they were also unable to use magic to call for backup. If they were caught by the police, they would most likely be treated as illegal immigrants of unknown nationality.

The girl had mixed feelings when she imagined their fate: that they would be in the same situation as herself, whose name they had stolen.

However, now she had a name.

Summer Ginjima.

It was a strange name, but she liked it.

More than anyone, more than any name-

As they sat on the veranda, Summer opened her mouth, a bit sadly. "Sorry, Ginjima-san."

"For what?"

"In the end... I couldn't do anything with magic. I couldn't do anything when you got hurt either."

Ginjima quietly shook his head at Summer's words. "Magic saved me."

"Huh?"

"After I couldn't talk anymore – I heard your voice the whole time."

Summer's face reddened slightly in embarrassment when she remembered how she had sobbed and cried.

"You told me, right? Magic is something you use to help people."

"That's – something I got from manga."

"Still, your voice saved me back then. See? That's some pretty useful magic."

Summer could not respond to his words.

For some reason, her eyes started overflowing with tears, and she looked at Ginjima with a troubled smile.

"Didn't think you were such a crybaby." Ginjima laughed and gently wiped away the girl's tears.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

When they began to hear the group members yawning and stretching behind them, Ginjima stood up and told the girl, "Hey, from now on, you don't have to force yourself to use magic to help people. Just use it for what you want."

"...okay! Thanks, Ginjima-san! Um, I've already decided what I wanna do!"

"Oh... what is it?"

"It's a secret, a secret! You and Sis will spank me if I tell you, so it's a secret!"

"...huh?"

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

Night – the Marubatsu-gumi's office.

"So Ginjima didn't end up dying..."

"Well, whatever. He's seriously hurt anyway. If we take this chance–"

The Marubatsu-gumi, composed of young members, was plotting ways to crush the Amida-gumi, when – suddenly, the glass of the office window shattered and a small, colorful shadow tumbled inside.

“What!?”

“This is the fourth floor!”

The members' gazes converged on a single point as they shoved their hands into their pockets, and a single girl appeared from within the cloud of dust.

“Good evening! Magical Girl Summer-chan, ally of herself, has arrived!”

The thugs, who were not even worthy of being called organized crime, stopped short at the sight of the girl wearing colorful clothing and glasses. While their heads were filled with questions, the girl raised her arms high and flourished the magic staff she was holding.

“Okay, everyone! Blow up **in a way that won't kill you!**”

“Huh?”

Everyone except the girl spoke simultaneously, forming a strange chorus.

At the same time, light shone here and there throughout the room, and fuses appeared on black spheres that looked like cannonballs–

Inside the building, an explosion occurred that was not strong enough to blow up the walls.

A girl rode a bicycle across the sky with that bomb blast as a backdrop. The bicycle flew as the moon shone behind her, just like the scene from *E.T.*.

If there was any difference, it would be the praying mantis the size of a puppy in the bicycle's basket.

It was only a single magic.

In the government records of the land of magic, it was a research subject listed as a magic, “Girl Number 893”.

It should have been nothing more than “magic” – but today, it obtained its own existence.

She truly obtained her reality as a “magical girl”.

Lyrical and magical.

Fancy and fantastical.

Without a doubt, just like the protagonist of a manga–

“Magic Girl Number 893” – end

Notes:

[1] 長 ドス: It's practically impossible to find information on it in English, but Japanese Wiki would have me know it's a long wakizashi, upwards of about 58 cm., with no guard.

[2] The suffix “-gumi” usually refers to a group, in this case the yakuza groups. I couldn't think of a suitable term in English – “Amida gang” and “Amida group” seemed kind of awkward – so I kept that intact.

[3] Ginjima is usually referred to as “kashira” or “wakagashira”, which is something like (young) boss. This is in contrast to the “kumichou”, who is the actual leader of the group.

[4] With the way “Samantha” is written in Japanese, 893 takes the first half, “Sama-”, as her nickname, which is also how the English “summer” is written. It doesn't carry over very well in translation but is necessary to explain where “Nacchan”, from “natsu”, Japanese for “summer”, comes from.

[5] night butterflies: term for women who work in nightlife. There doesn't seem to be an equivalent term that keeps the "mantis being bullied by butterflies" sort of joke.

[6] Ginjima actually starts to use the word "esa", which can also mean "bait", and since mantises can be used as fish bait, well.

[end of story spoiler] "mahou shoujo" is generally translated as "magical girl", composed of "mahou", "magic", and "shoujo", "girl". The title, "mahou shoujo 893gou", is meant to be read at first glance as "Magical Girl Number 893", though broken into its constituents, it's "Magic Girl Number 893". In the last segment, the government calls her "mahou 「shoujo 893gou」 ", or "magic, 'Girl Number 893'". Due to this difference in handling adjectives, and to preserve the punchline, I chose to go with the less common translation of "Magic Girl Number 893" for the title.

DEAR SIR HERO OF LIGHT (GENRE "LEGENDARY HERO")



拝啓、光の勇者様

・ジャンル《デンセツノユウシャ》

“Hey there. I am the 24,856th hero of Caronaplete–”

“Okay, die.”

That steady voice was accompanied by a concrete block that swung down onto the suit-clad, self-styled “hero”’s head.

“Eeee...” The self-styled hero, a salaryman, let out a scream reminiscent of the cry of a small animal. The block smashed right into his forehead and he fell to the ground.

Enveloped in the darkness of the night, the “demon king” took the concrete block in his hand and murmured quietly, “Ah, it’s a really nice night...”

The “demon king” slowly crouched down and dropped concrete block after concrete block atop the “hero”, who had already stopped moving.

The “demon king” muttered in the darkness of the night as he dragged along the completely silent salaryman, “I wonder if there’s an incinerator or a landfill around here...”

“...Well, whatever. I’ll ask Hariyama-san about it tomorrow.”

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

Ten days earlier, Hikarijima, Tokyo District, Hikarijima Metropolitan High School

“The truth is, I’m a hero.”

A classroom after school, wrapped in the pale orange of twilight. I had been called here by her, a good friend of mine since childhood, and we gazed outside through the window, just the two of us.

“Huh?” Even I had to admit I sounded pretty stupid. “...oh, really? So is this a new joke of yours?”

I smiled as I let her know I was listening, but she retorted coldly, “Listen to me!”

...What did I do? I had been completely serious when I thought “It was a joke,” and I’d responded appropriately, so what had I done wrong?

I’d thought for sure she would confess to me. It’s only logical, right? What else could happen in this situation except a confession? What do you expect? Until now, we’d hung out together as friends, but lately we’d started becoming very aware of each other as members of the opposite sex. At least, that was how it was for me. If she wasn’t going to confess, then I would.

But that thought was completely crushed by her next sentence.

“You know, I’m the reincarnation of the holy warrior of light, servant of the god Nambaja, who was summoned to the ancient Holy Millennium Continent!”

Her somewhat long black hair reflected the setting sun and shone bewitchingly. Her words were lively, but even so, they were not at all realistic.

Right. They were lively in a different way. Put another way, they were “delusional”.

Her name was Maya Isojima. She was my childhood friend... and the girl I liked. It wasn’t that I had a preference for girls with wild imaginations, and I had no interest in the type of obsessive girl who would go as far as to try to become a character.

She had been a completely normal person until yesterday.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

Our home, Hikarijima, was a solitary island with about two thousand residents. It was a little more than three hundred kilometers east of Iwaki in Fukushima Prefecture, existing in isolation on the other side of the Japan Trench. There were no other islands around, and the population was crammed into an area of about fifteen square kilometers.

It was an island without any particular tourist attractions, currently part of the Tokyo Metropolitan Area. The outsiders who visited the island on a regular basis only came during the time decided on by the group that researched the Japan Trench. There was

no regular service, and the postman and distributors were the only ones who traveled freely between here and the mainland.

On the other hand, it couldn't be said that the island wasn't developed. I had only gone to the mainland once on a middle-school field trip, but our town didn't seem at all different from the ones in magazines.

Recently, they'd finally installed a broadband connection that used satellites, and the Internet finally began making waves on the island. By the way, my house didn't have Internet yet.

We had our own metropolitan high school and there were about thirty students in each grade. There was only one class for each grade, but it wasn't lonely. When I watched TV, sometimes there were schools with only one person in a grade. In contrast, my head would spin when I saw schools with several hundred people in a grade.

Did people on the mainland really possess such good memories? It took everything I had to remember the names of the people in my class.

Among them, the first classmate whose name I remembered was – Maya Isojima.

She was the daughter of the Shinto priest of the Kourai Shrine in the middle of the island. She dressed as a priestess on New Year's and festival days and assisted the islanders.

My house was near the shrine, and so I was acquainted with her before entering kindergarten, and I had often saved her when a dog made her cry.

Of course, I'd also been bitten by dogs and felt like I would die.

Looking back on the past, I could only remember Maya's crying face from when we were little. I had cried just as much as she did, so it was probably the same for her.

That was what I thought, but–

At that moment, my confidence vanished.

“What... did you say?”

“That I’m a hero, of course!”

“Like Heracles?”

I thought it was a stupid response, but at that point in time, I still thought that Maya was joking. The problem was that it was an extremely bad joke, and Maya was not the type of person to make jokes like that.

“No. Of the Ancient Millennium Continent.”

“Stop. Stop right there.”

I held up my hands, and Maya closed her mouth, staring blankly at me.

“To begin with, what’s this millennium continent? And what do you mean by ancient? Is there a Modern Millennium Continent somewhere?”

I asked those questions to find out whether Maya was joking or serious. However, the answer I received was wildly different from what I had expected.

“–So then the god Nambaja stood beside my bed and told me! ‘I shall resurrect thee to walk the path of the moon and dispel the darkness!’ Then I felt Letmuj’s magic and recalled all my memories of the past!”

Was she ignoring me?

This was bad. She looked serious.

Hang on a second.

Seriously, hang on.

I’m begging you, hang on.

I’d heard of this before. The world was large. I’d heard before that countless people thought they were “self-styled reincarnated warriors”.

Some of them thought they were descendants or reincarnations of the people of Lemuria or Atlantis. Others thought they had received a divine revelation from aliens.

I didn't know if they were the real thing. Well, like it or not, I wouldn't have any choice but to believe them if they actually shot beams from their hands right in front of me, but I didn't want to see that.

But, but.

Hold on a second.

Maya wasn't... like that, right?

No, she wasn't. If I had to choose whether she was or not, it would definitely be not.

I at least knew she meant she'd received a message or something from a long time ago. No, even though I didn't want to.

But I'd never seen Maya act like this. She'd never said anything like this before, and anyway, it made no sense for a priest's daughter to go on about ghosts and supernatural phenomena.

Just yesterday, she had been delighted that they could finally access the Internet through satellite broadband at the shrine. "Now even shrines and temples will enter the information age!" she had said excitedly as she browsed the Internet.

Once again, I was unable to believe the words of the girl before me, and I raised my voice in protest. "Wait, Maya. Hold on a second. You mean... that's it? You called me after school just to tell me that, so then the punchline is that I'm the reincarnation of one of those warriors too?"

Oh, fine. Now that it'd come to this, I might as well play along till the end. I would hold out until Maya said, "Sorry, sorry! I was just teasing you!"

I had still not given up. I continued to cling to the hope that she was only joking.

On the other hand, I was seriously concerned, thinking, "Maybe she got hit in the head." The possibility that "She's really lost it" did exist in the recesses of my heart, but I didn't dare think about it and instead chose to ignore it.

"So, what's my power as a warrior? Can I control fire? Fly through the sky? Predict the end of humanity? ...hey, c'mon, say something," I said to Maya, who had been quiet for a while.

Maya and I were enveloped in an awkward silence.

It really was a joke, huh? In that case, that was the lamest thing I could've said, so Maya had just given up.

No, please let that be it.

I couldn't stand it.

I didn't want Maya to have lost her mind.

If the problem lay elsewhere, I would put myself on the line to save Maya. But honestly, I had no idea how to deal with a problem of the mind.

A counselor... that was probably the best way. I didn't know any ways of curing serious delusions. ...I could start looking into it now, but I didn't really have the luxury to be so relaxed about it... as ignorant as I was now, that was the only choice I could make.

But – while I was hesitating over such trivialities, Maya seemed to be worrying about something more serious.

I thought she had been hanging her head in shame, but she seemed to come to a decision, and she opened her mouth. "No. That's not it. You're just a human, Shouma. Just a human, without the power to control fire or predict the future."

"...oh, I see," I answered dejectedly.

It was not that I increasingly felt that she was serious – I was dejected because my old, cherished friend had said I was "just a human".

It felt as if Maya had said she didn't care whether or not I existed.

Yeah, and the fact that I was disappointed was because I was really worried about Maya.

...If I didn't think about it that way, I wouldn't be able to stand it.

"So then why are you telling me this?"

I spoke in a tone that said I no longer cared, and Maya murmured, her cheeks reddening slightly, "...Because I like you."

"Huh?"

"I wanted you to know the truth, Shouma. I haven't even told Dad and Mom I'm a hero of light..."

I was confused.

No, there was nothing to be confused about. Just now, Maya had said that she liked me.

I'd forget this stuff about being a hero. That was definitely just something she said to hide her embarrassment at confessing.

After that brief flash of hope, Maya ignored my feelings and just continued to say whatever she wanted. "I at least wanted the person I like to know."



Maya smiled to hide her embarrassment, picked up her bag, and slung it over her shoulder.

"The real reason I'm leaving the island."

"Huh?"

By the time I raised my voice, she had already run out of sight.

The next thing I knew, the sun had already set and the inside of the classroom was enveloped in darkness. I was left alone in the semi-dark without the lights turned on, and I opened my mouth, wearing a befuddled expression.

"What was that about... she was talking like she was going to leave the island..."

It wasn't "like". No matter how I looked at it, she had come right out and said she was "leaving the island." But I had not been able to ask what she meant. I hadn't been able to chase after her and stop her either.

I made the excuse that she had said too many things at once and thrown my heart into disarray.

There was nothing I could do. I would ask her for the details tomorrow. Today, I needed to calm my heart.

I could still be so **optimistic** because I had not yet accepted the reality of her words.

And so, I soon came to regret that decision.

One week had passed since then.

After I watched her back as she ran from the classroom-

I hadn't seen Maya since.

A search request was submitted to the police three nights after Maya went missing. Maybe they waited too long, but I had no right to talk.

When her parents and the police asked me about the situation, I didn't tell them about my last conversation with her. That was because Maya had said, "I only want you to know." Telling other people would be the same as betraying Maya.

...I know.

In the end, it was nothing but an excuse. In truth, I hated the thought that Maya had lost her mind. I hated the thought that I was lying.

If she was normally like that, my testimony might have been useful. But up until that afternoon, Maya had really been a normal girl. They wouldn't believe me if I told them, "She suddenly started claiming she was a hero..."

On the contrary, I would probably fall under suspicion. I would have to pass on that.

But one week after Maya disappeared, I was gripped by an indescribable sense of loss now that she was no longer with me.

Ah, it was true. I really did love Maya.

I wanted to protect her no matter what. I wanted to hear her voice. No, as long as she was okay, that was enough. As long as I saw her again, happy and healthy, that would be enough.

On top of that, it would be great if she would accept my confession.

Though it was a little late, I reconfirmed that. I also took the chance to confirm that I was a hopeless snob.

I thought back on her words, words that only I knew, and began to think about her whereabouts myself. However, no matter how much I thought about it, the answer did not come to me. If her words were to be believed, it might be something like, "I'm a hero, so I went on a journey," but-

"Why? Where's the final boss? What's she protecting the world from?" I muttered anxiously. I remembered the plots of the manga and games I had dabbled in in the past.

Of course, among those were stories where one day, the protagonist's sweetheart or a beautiful woman who suddenly appeared told him, "I'm a hero," or "I'm a servant of God."

"So then, what did the guys in my position do..."

When I thought about it, I felt like it was usually something like "The protagonist is also an amazing hero," or "He's a normal human, but he keeps getting involved in incidents, and that gives him a chance to grow closer to the girl."

So then I should be attacked by the vassals of the demon king?

Enough already. Hurry up and attack. If they did, it would mean Maya hadn't gone crazy.

No, it no longer mattered whether Maya was sane or crazy, whether she was a hero or Villager A. I just wanted her to come back to me. That was all.

And so... I pray for you to appear, vassals of the demon king. Please attack me.

So that, with perfect timing, Maya would come and save me-

But I was too naïve.

This matter really was something far removed from reality.

However, the unpleasant phenomenon was completely different from what I had imagined.

Then again, by the time I realized it, it was already far too late.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

“Are you still feeling down, Shouma?”

Lunch break, seven days after Maya disappeared. My classmate Ikemoto spoke to me as I lay sprawled out across the desk next to the window.

In the end, there was no sign of Maya again today. Scarily enough, I was slowly beginning to grow used to life without her. When I realized that fact, I was filled with self-hatred, and I sprawled out across the desk, but—

“Forget about Isojima already. Okay? It’s better that way.”

Annoying. What do you know?

That was what I wanted to yell, but right now, I wasn’t in the mood. In the first place, if I yelled something like that at someone who was really worried about me, I would only end up being more disgusted with myself.

Ikemoto had been my best friend since middle school, and he’d always been there to comfort me whenever I felt down. That was why I only gave a single-line reply. “...Just leave me alone.”

“Don’t be like that. You were lucky.”

“?”

“The fewer victims, the better... you should count yourself lucky Isojima didn’t drag you into it.”

...oh, I get it.

I could only be grateful that she hadn’t said, “You’re also the reincarnation of a hero!” and dragged me into her game of heroic make-believe.

Hm?

Huh?

That’s weird.

I didn't think I'd told Ikemoto about the hero stuff.

In that case, why did he know about it?

I turned my gaze to him suspiciously, and Ikemoto grinned and continued speaking.
“You were definitely fortunate.”

His smile was completely without ulterior motives, a smile just like that of an angel. It even made me question why I had thought such a thing.

“Fortunate?”

“Yeah, that's right. You were protected. But Isojima had already fallen so far I couldn't save her with my power. You should forget her, for your own good.”

“Huh?”

What was this about?

I didn't get what he was saying at all. And in the first place, why did Ikemoto smile so happily? I thought he got along well with Isojima too.

“What're you talking about, Ikemoto? Do you know where Maya went? Do you know what happened to her!?”

In response to my question, Ikemoto began to explain carefully, without his smile fading in the slightest.

“Yeah, her heart was captured by the Calamitous God Uzuru, and she became the advance guard of the Higher Gods of the Pure Land. But she sensed my presence and fled from the island.”

“...Calamitous God Uzu...? What's that?”

I was completely unable to understand what Ikemoto was saying. I couldn't understand his words at all, much less what he was thinking.

“The Calamitous God Uzuru. It was originally a fragment of the planet Deltomatritis in the Shadowland Nebula that came in contact with human malice and gained a will of its own.”

“Wait! Hold on a second!”

I remembered. I remembered this.

I remembered something like this!

“Sorry, I don’t really care about that Uzuru thing. Why did Maya run away!?”

“Oh... just between us, I was born from the union of a human and an alien from the planet Beguashjoeshwijophasia.”

“Your mother and father are both Japanese!”

No.

Now wasn’t the time for such retorts. But I couldn’t help but say it.

We were only getting a little off-topic, but right now, I wanted to escape from the whirlpool of words unfolding right in front of me.

“Don’t worry about the details! Anyway, I have to finish off all of Uzuru’s guard in order to accomplish my mission...”

Oh, him too?

Even him?

I see. So this really was a joke.

Maya and Ikemoto definitely teamed up to mess with me. No, please let that be it.

But I remembered the faces of the police who interrogated me and was reminded that Maya’s disappearance was definitely not a joke.

“Hey... Ikemoto... I dunno where you learned what Maya and I were talking about... but if you joke around like that, I’ll get seriously mad.”

My voice was so calm it surprised me. But on the other hand, my hands were balled up very, very tightly. My nails bit into my skin so hard it hurt. But I couldn’t help but clench them tightly.

The moment I let myself go, I would probably hit my best friend. No matter what his reasons, there was a difference between good and bad jokes.

Even as I trembled with fury... there was a corner of my heart that was frightened.

We'd known each other for a long time, so I knew.

Ikemoto's eyes – were serious too.

"It's not a joke. Accept it and give up, Shouma. Isojima's not coming back."

"Stop it."

"They might take advantage of you if you keep dwelling in your regret. Isojima might've just been trying to seduce you."

"Stoooooop!"

The moment I screamed, I also struck out at Ikemoto. But he nimbly dodged my fist and spoke to me with a sad expression. "...Yeah, I thought you would say that. But relax. I won't do anything to make you sad."

"Shut up. I'm telling you to shut up, seriously."

"I'll end everything before Isojima comes back to you. Somewhere you won't see..."

This time, I immediately understood what he meant.

I would knock him out somehow and carry him to the hospital. It didn't matter if it was a mental or physical illness. There was nothing wrong with throwing people who talked about killing Maya into the hospital. If the hospital was no good, I'd even give him over to the police.

The moment I made that decision and glared at Ikemoto–

Ikemoto had turned on his heel and was already dashing out of the classroom.

"See you, Shouma. If I manage to bring peace back to this world someday – will you be my friend again?"

“Like I’ll let you! Hold on a second! Hey, listen to me! Ikemoto!”

After I got over my confusion, I tried to give chase, but unfortunately, Ikemoto was faster than me. The distance between us widened in the blink of an eye, and the next thing I knew, Ikemoto was already turning the corner in the hall.

My best friend’s back looked terribly far away as he disappeared. It felt like he had grown far away from me in various ways.

And then – I did not see Ikemoto again after that.

Ikemoto’s search request was submitted to the police the next day.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

The next day, I wore a confused expression when I reached my classroom.

“...?”

Something was off. There were only about half as many people as usual in the room.

Were they skipping school just to be on the safe side, since Maya and Ikemoto disappeared one after the other?

It worried me, and so I spoke to my classmate, Makabe, beside me.

He was reading some sort of magazine. It was *Dengeki hp*, a magazine oriented toward teens in which a lot of light novels were serialized. He must’ve been pretty hardcore to be openly reading it during school. The Hikarijima bookstore didn’t receive that magazine, so he probably ordered it himself. I got some pleasure out of reading light novels, so he often let me borrow it.

“Hey, Makabe. Aren’t there a lot fewer people today?”

“Huh?”

Makabe glanced up from his magazine at my face and then looked out over the classroom, as if only now noticing.

“You’re right. Is it because...”

'Somehow, doesn't it kind of seem like he'll say everyone's gone because of the work of a demon king or evil god?'

I was slightly uneasy, but the answer I received was perfectly reasonable.

"Might be the flu. Seems like it's the season for it on the mainland... did it finally reach here too?"

It didn't answer anything, but I was greatly relieved.

It looked like I was nervous over nothing. I had to calm down...

The moment I thought that, our homeroom teacher entered the classroom. It looked like this really was all the people who were going to come.

The teacher slammed the attendance record on his desk and opened his mouth, wearing a placid expression.

"Ah, there's something I have to tell you all."

Maybe our teacher would give us some explanation for the mass absences and Ikemoto's disappearance. That was what I thought, and so I paid unusually close attention to his words.

However-

"To tell the truth, the world is currently in unprecedented danger."

At his words, the classroom, which had been filled with chatter, became so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

"Jaja Moticius, the dark god I sealed long ago, has been resurrected. I must march into battle once again."

Chatter, chatter

The classroom began to buzz at his words.

I alone remained silent, wearing an expression of despair.

...Give me a break already.

Enough was enough. Give me a break.

I'll apologize.

I don't know who I'm supposed to apologize to, but anyway, I'll apologize!

I suppressed my urge to scream with all my might, and a girl, the class representative, stood up suddenly.

"Sir, what in the world are you talking about?"

Yeah, exactly. You tell him, class rep!

I no longer had the willpower to object to this kind of thing. Do your best for me too!

And then, only an instant after I placed all my hopes on her-

"Do you understand? Everyone who didn't come today is an alien bandit from the Deadbout planet! You need to organize the class into defense squads immediately! With my power, we can call forth a giant holy soldier!"

"Stop speaking nonsense! There's no way alien bandits exist! That's absurd!"

"Well, what about you, Sir!? Don't talk about unscientific things like dark gods!"

Cut it out!

"Cut it out!"

The next thing I knew, my inner thoughts leaked out and I shouted.

I slammed both hands on my desk and stood, then grabbed my things and left the classroom.

What in the world was happening?

I didn't get it at all.

What was going on?

What exactly was happening around me?

Ah, I was still naïve back then.

This weird “something” was just a small part of what was happening around me.

Afterward, I came to realize and hate the naivety of my own thoughts.

And how yelling how much I hated it would do nothing to end it.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

In the end, I had no destination in mind when I left school, and so I went home. My father and mother should be out fishing around now. They wouldn't get mad at me for skipping school.

I noticed an unusually large crowd of people on the way home, making me feel anxious. It seemed like a fight had broken out and I had come across the police breaking it up.

Ah, if everyone around me claiming to be a hero was the real thing, I wanted to tell them to stop the nearby fights first.

I grumbled about those things as I opened the door to my house – and there I saw my father and mother's shoes lined up.

Had they come home? In that case, I had to make up a reason for having come back so early. Telling them my teacher and the class rep had turned into legendary heroes just wouldn't cut it as an excuse, even if it was the truth.

“Ah, I wasn't feeling well...”

I came up with something appropriate as I opened the door to the living room. My father was sitting there with a placid expression.

My father looked every inch the fisherman, and his large eyes widened even further as he called to me.

"Oh, Shouma... good timing. We need to talk."

I'd said I wasn't feeling well, but my father wasn't at all worried about my health. Still, I was overcome by his serious expression, and I reluctantly knelt in front of the living room table.

"What is it, Dad?"

"Well, there's something I need to tell you about."

"Huh..."

I had a bad feeling about this.

That feeling would probably come true.

I knew that because my father's eyes were "serious".

"In truth, our family is descended from a shinobi clan that has secretly served the Togukawa clan for generations."

"Haa..."

"Listen to me. I know it's so sudden you're surprised, but this is a race against time. This island has been infiltrated by ninjas secretly in the service of various lords, everyone from the Oda and Toyotomi clans to the Kobayakawa and Shakushain clans... and so I will pass on to you the secret ninja techniques of the Kougai style. We have to start wiping out the other ninja tomorrow."

'Are ninja techniques really something that can be mastered in one night?' I thought to myself, but I no longer had the willpower to retort. Maybe I was just on *Candid Camera* or something?

Maya and Ikemoto and our teacher and the class rep and my dad were all in cahoots. There was definitely a TV camera recording me somewhere.

That was the only explanation. Either that or I was having a bad dream.

"Oh, you're back, Shouma."

With that, my mother came through the door on the other side of the living room.

My mother looked at me and opened her mouth, smiling brightly. "Congratulations, Shouma."

I had a bad feeling again.

It was exactly the same kind of smile Ikemoto had given me yesterday.

"I got all my memories back. I am an angel dispatched from Heaven who married a human and has been hiding on Earth. But now that the seals on Hell have weakened, I have recovered myself, thanks to Our Heavenly Father's guidance."

"Hm? What are you saying, Mother?"

My father tilted his head at my mother's words, confused.

Aren't you guys accomplices?

"You have inherited my blood, Shouma. You can join me as the child of an angel!"

"What nonsense are you spouting!?"

"...I'm sorry, dear. It seems I've been lying to you until now. But you don't have the blood of an angel, and you can't survive in the world we must go to... I'm really sorry."

This was turning out really weird. Maybe it really was *Candid Camera*.

"Hmph! You bastard! Are you a ninja of the Oda clan!? Where did you hide my real wife!?"

As soon as he yelled, my father withdrew from his pocket the carving knife he used to gut fish while onboard.

"Answer! Else my famed blade, Kougaimaru, will drink of your blood!"

"Dear!? What's wrong!? ...C-could a demon have taken over your heart?" my mother said, and pulled the same knife from her own pocket.

"Don't worry! This holy sword will cut only the evil spirit! It won't hurt you if you hold still and cooperate!"

"Bullshit!"

The holy sword and the famed blade looked like the same kind of knife to me.

But my mother and father stood in completely different stances as they crossed blades.

It took only a moment.

It happened pretty suddenly, but there was no trace of reality in their actions or their words, and I just-

I just continued to stare at the shine of the holy sword and the famed blade.

Well, they were actually just knives.

...

...

...

Right, just knives.

They were knives.

...

Wait, wasn't this dangerous?

Wasn't this situation really dangerous?

Someone could die, right?

Do you get it, Dad, Mom?

You know, that you were... **killing each other right in front of your son, you two!**

I finally returned to my senses, and just when I was about to yell at them to stop-

My father's blade pierced through my mother's windpipe.

The sudden spectacle didn't seem at all real to me.

But the redness of the gushing blood alone entered my reality-

The next thing I knew, I was running.

I was yelling something as I fled my house, trying to get as far away as possible, focused only on running.

Right, I ran away.

I ran away from my own family.

It wasn't *Candid Camera*.

It wasn't a joke!

It was definitely not some kind of trick.

The "death" I had just witnessed with my own eyes was the real thing!

It wasn't a joke.

My mother died! Just now, she definitely died!

Then maybe it was only a dream?

My only way out now was if this was a dream, dammit!

It was a dream.

A dream, a dream, a dream, a dream.

It was a dream, right? Right?

Hey, tell me.

I don't care who. Someone tell me.

...How do you wake up from a dream?

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

In any case, the nightmare continued to unfold around me as I ran in search of the police.

My home was near the shrine where Maya lived, so it was a bit removed from the town proper. That was why I ran toward town, looking for the police. If I went to the shopping district, I should be able to get phone reception.

Just when I thought that-

I was met with the sight of numerous clouds of smoke rising from between the buildings.

Angry shouts and shrieks pierced my ears.

My nose picked up the scent of blood and the irritating odor of leaking oil.

What?

What was happening?

Hold on. Hold on a second.

This was a dream, right?

Why wasn't it over yet?

I walked into the shopping district, still confused, and there, a scene from Hell was unfolding.

A rebellion.

Just from looking, there was nothing else it could be.

There were car collisions scattered here and there down the street. Some among them were blazing furiously; others were already burnt black.

People were exchanging blows. They were screaming and cursing at each other. But everyone's eyes were full of hope. It was as if they were all fighting for what they believed in.

Where were the police?

But what should I do if I went to the police? My father killed my mother. What was I supposed to say?

No, hang on, this was a dream. I didn't need to say anything. Wait, then why was I going to the police anyway?

In the meantime, a single policeman appeared in front of me.



Uh, Police Guy, uh-

“Are you all right!? Leave this to me and go somewhere safe!”

Police Guy, why are you prepping your gun? Isn’t that really, really dangerous?

“It’s okay! Just between us, I’m a galactic detective dispatched by the Galactic Federation! This gun won’t – gaaah!”

A man appeared behind Police Guy and beat his head with a rock, over and over.

“Galactic!? You’re in league with the aliens! As a member of the Earth Special Investigation Squad, I cannot overlook your secret ma-”

Before the man had finished speaking, Police Guy, his head bleeding, pointed his gun at the man and pulled the trigger- [1]

-!

That gunshot completely cleared my mind, which had been fogged with confusion.

But even so – the end of the town’s nightmare was still not in sight.

...Would it be easier if I just went crazy? I turned my back on the policeman as he trampled the fallen man’s head and ran away from that place as fast as I could.

It was as if the island itself was bleeding.

The town was filled with the rusted smell of iron. The smell of death. The smell of death. The smell of death.

“Servant of the devil!” “You’re from the planet Zuja too, aren’t you!?” “Associate!” “Dictatorship dog!” “I won’t lose to an Under-Earthling!” “Taste my High Sunrise Fist!” “I am a true hero.” “I’m a hero, you know!” “Cause I’m a hero.” “I” “I am” “I’m” “Hero”

“Hero” “Hero” “Hero” “Hero” “Hero” “Hero” “Hero” “Hero” “Hero” “Hero” “Hero”
“Hero” “Hero” “Hero” “Hero” “Hero” “Hero” ...

All I could hear were those voices, so out of touch with reality.

Oh, good.

There was no way this was reality.

It's a dream a dream a dream a dream a dream not reality a dream a dream everything
everything everything imaginary a lie a dream a lie a dream imaginary an illusion
everything a lie a dream an illusion a lie imaginary a lie a dream an illusion an illusion
an illusion a dreamlike illusion is a lie and imaginary.

My mother wasn't dead.

There was no way she was dead.

She wasn't stabbed.

I had no mother.

I had no father.

There was no one.

None none none none none none.

There was nothing. See, there was nothing. There was nothing inside me and nothing
outside me.

My

My

My my

My my my

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaAaaaaAAaaaAaaaaAAaaAaaaaAA-

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaI AAAAAAAAAAAaaa no way
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaAaaaaaaa”

AAAAAA a a

Aa a “AAAAA” aaAA

Aaaaa “” a aaaAAAAA

“a a” a

“Shouma. Hey, Shouma.”

AAAAAaaa aaa “aa”

“Shouma!”

AAaa... aaaaa.... ...?

“Shouma!”

“...huh... Makabe...?”

“Get a grip. What’s up with you? Screaming all of a sudden like that...”

When I stopped panicking and regained my composure, I found my classmate standing in front of me and peering into my face.

“Well, it got pretty bad after you ran out of the classroom, like there was a revolt or something... I got away somehow, but...”

“Which hero?”

“Huh?”

“Which hero are you?”

I'd already grown used to it. You could say I'd given up.

This was a dream anyway. A figment of my imagination. Yeah, I wondered what god Makabe served.

When I asked somewhat defiantly, Makabe gave just the sort of answer I had been expecting.

"Huh... how'd you know? I'm definitely one of the chosen heroes."

"Oh, I see."

So I was right after all.

I felt like I wanted to go crazy, but – I felt a slight sense of unease at Makabe's next words, so I kept my consciousness firmly grounded in reality.

"Umm... right, I'm the chosen hero of Mayonnai Kingdom... no, that's not it. A black suit from the shrine hospital... wha... descended from *kirin*... my right hand's Imagine Breaker... and... huh? Hold on... hold on a second..." [2]

"?"

"I... I... which one? **Which one am I?**"

Right after that, Makabe reached into his bag, as if being controlled by something, and pulled out a book. It was the magazine he had been reading this morning, a collection of adventure stories.

Makabe flipped through the pages and muttered something to himself under his breath.

"Ahh... I guess I am the hero of Mayonnai Kingdom... maybe... I came to defeat... the black dragon...?"

"Give me that."

I quickly snatched the book and glanced down at the page Makabe had been reading. When I did, I found that many of the lines Makabe had just been saying were written there.

'What... in the world?'

I didn't really understand, but I tried desperately to sort out my thoughts.

And then I suddenly hit upon a realization – and I asked the confused boy in front of me, the one I thought to be most knowledgeable in our class about manga and novels.

"Hey... Makabe. Have you heard of an 'Ancient Millennium Continent'?"

That was one of the terms that had come up in Maya's mutterings. I remembered it because it was the only thing I had been able to calmly retort to.

"Huh? ...yeah, I know it... it's from a *shoujo* manga called *Nambaja Prison*. It's the name of the continent the heroine was from in her past life."

"...!"

Bingo. Now that he mentioned it, I also remembered hearing the word "Nambaja".

I continued to shower Makabe with various questions, but it seemed that Maya's words were not at all a product of her own imagination.

Knowing this wasn't much different from not knowing anything.

But I had definitely found a connection to Maya. It didn't matter how trivial the information was; I couldn't deny that there was a chance it could resolve this situation.

I tossed the book back to Makabe, turned around, and went back the way I had come.

However, my destination was not my house. It was the oldest building on this island – Kourai Shrine.

Or in other words, I was going to where Maya lived–

I'd be fine with a way to wake from this dream.

If this was real, then a way to turn the island back to normal would be fine. A way to bring my mother back to life would be fine. Anything would be fine.

Even just a hint – I just wanted some hint on how to end this ridiculous nightmare–

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

When I climbed the long stone stairs leading to the shrine, I found a wooden building with something of an air of history. It was Kourai Shrine, situated right in the middle of the island.

Contained within were two modern structures that were completely at odds with the solemn shrine: the small archives detailing the island's history and its specialties, and the house where the priest and his family lived – in other words, Maya's house.

I didn't know what in the world was happening to this island. No, it wasn't that I didn't know what was happening to the island. I didn't know what was happening to me.

Why in the world was I having this nightmare?

Right, now that I thought about it, wouldn't it all make sense if it was something weird happening to me instead of everyone else acting weird?

But I was sane.

Of course I was sane.

So this had to be a dream.

If I just woke up, I'd go back to my normal life. I would go to school with Maya... ah, that's right. If I woke up, I'd confess to Maya properly. I'd figured out my feelings for Maya inside this dream.

...Right, this was a dream. It was definitely a dream. To prove it, I still hadn't felt any pain. But even though pinching my cheeks was a simple matter, I couldn't bring myself to do it.

"...No, I'm not scared. You might be able to imagine pain inside a dream... there's not really any point to it."

As I spoke words that even I didn't find logical, I passed by the shrine and pushed Maya's house's doorbell.

A short time passed, and then Maya's father appeared from inside. He was dressed in a priest's primarily white costume, and he gazed at me with lifeless eyes.

Well, it was only natural. It had been more than a week since his daughter had disappeared.

...was what I thought in my sleep. That was why he was looking at me like that. Right, because this was a dream.

...I knew. I knew I was being unreasonable.

But if I didn't think about it this way, I wouldn't be able to move a single step forward. My mother's blood-covered face in front of me in front of me stop stop stop... don't think about it!

... Dammit.

I shook off those idle thoughts and bowed my head to Maya's father with a meek expression.

"Um... hello."

"Hey... Shouma-kun. What is it?"

I made up a suitable reason, that "I might have an idea where Maya is," and successfully entered her room.

Maya's room was perfectly ordered, clearly reflecting her methodical personality.

There were a number of cute stationery sets spread out across her desk, as if she had just finished writing a letter to someone.

"...We've left it this way ever since my daughter disappeared... because she'll get mad if we move things around without asking her..."

“Yeah.”

I gave a noise of agreement and looked around the room. ...Not at all at random, but searching for a certain book.

And then, I soon found it. There was a row of comics with red *obi* lined up on top of the bookshelf in the room. The words *Nambaja Prison* were written across the spines.

There was no doubt. These were... the books that had warped Maya’s heart, without a doubt.

“? Is there something wrong with those books?”

The priest looked puzzled, watching as I picked out the manga from the bookshelf.

I didn’t really answer. I opened the first volume silently and began flipping through the pages.

Just as I’d expected, I saw many of the terms Maya had mentioned, like Nambaja and the Ancient Millennium Continent.

As I thought – all those “hero” stories weren’t suddenly coming out of nowhere. The information came from somewhere else.

Just when I realized that, something fell from inside the book. It was an envelope a size smaller than the book, and in Maya’s handwriting, the words “*To Shouma*” were written.

“Huh...?”

I couldn’t breathe for a moment, caught off-guard by the letter’s sudden appearance. It was the same for her father, who looked between the letter and my face, surprised.

“That’s...”

I didn’t hesitate. I immediately opened the envelope and pulled out several sheets of stationery.

Dear Mr. Shouma,

Ah, Shouma?

I wonder if you're reading this letter? I seldom write letters, so I do not quite know the proper way to do so. And is it acceptable to use "dear" like this? But writing so formally is kind of strange. Maybe the way I usually talk is fine? It is, right?

If you're reading this letter, does that mean I'm no longer on the island? Maybe I'm not even in this world anymore.

Something inside me is changing, little by little. How should I put it? I have to save the world – that sense of duty feels like it's taking over my body.

That's how it's been until now – but today is different. It's really concrete, changing my thoughts. It's telling me to defeat the world's enemies, trying to make me into a legendary hero. I don't know if I'll be able to finish writing this letter, so I'll try to make this short.

If I disappear, and even if I say weird things, right now, at this moment, I like you, Shouma. But I'm really worried. I don't know if this feeling will stay after I change. That's why I'm writing a letter.

I think you'll definitely find this letter, Shouma. And also.

The first sheet ended there.

Ahh, don't worry, Maya. On that day, you came right out and told me you liked me.

But I would put that aside for now. First I had to look for the cause of this ridiculous incident. ...so that I would be able to see Maya again.

But still... what did she mean, changing her thoughts? Did she mean something like hypnosis or brainwashing?

I made to read the second sheet of stationery, but before I could, Maya's father spoke up from behind me.

“...Shouma-kun. Do you – not feel anything?”

“Huh?”

“You... well, hm. You don’t think you’re some kind of special existence?”

That was when I finally realized.

That the priest was still normal. And that he knew exactly what was happening.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

“Shouma-kun... how much do you know about the origin of this island?”

When the priest guided me into the archives, he began saying strange things.

He told me that Hikarijima had originally been unpopulated, and people had begun immigrating here in the middle of the Edo period, and that what was initially a population of a few dozen islanders gradually increased to the number there were today. There were rumors that those original few dozen were deportees, but it seemed the existing records were ambiguous.

When he told me that, the priest shook his head quietly.

“That’s not true, Shouma-kun. Those few dozen people... to be exact, those thirty-six... they were not deportees. Accurate records have been handed down through this shrine.”

? But the reference materials we used in class...”

“It’s not in normal textbooks or dictionaries. There’s no way they could report it... In the first place, until the middle of the Edo period, **this island didn’t even exist.**”

The priest’s expression was not so much calm as it was mournful, and, falteringly, he continued to reveal to me the truth surrounding this island.

“Those thirty-six – **were offerings.**”

According to the priest's story, the true origin of this island was as follows.

It had happened several hundred years ago, but – the mainland had been suffering from an unimaginable famine (it seemed like there were some records saying that evil river and mountain spirits had appeared). A certain famous shaman had carried out a rite of “God-Summoning”.

Acting as an oracle, the shaman therefore had weights tied to thirty-six sacrifices, who were submerged in the designated area of the ocean. Of course, they were still alive, just as the word “sacrifice” demanded...

Whether by coincidence or fate, that area of the sea was just west of this island – right above the deepest part of the Japan Trench.

They had offered their sacrifices. The next step was for God, or one of God's messengers, the so-called “Hero of Light”, to finally be summoned to this world, but...

All that appeared above the ocean was a single small rock.

Of course, it was strange for a rock to appear in the ocean where previously there was nothing, but the shaman had not been hoping for a supernatural phenomenon.

The dejected shaman left that rock behind, but–

Several months later, the shaman still couldn't stop thinking about that rock, and when he reached that place again at the end of a long boat trip–

There he found that a single island had appeared, and the thirty-six sacrifices who should have sunk into the ocean were living there.

“That shaman created a shrine here. So you could say that this shrine actually has nothing to do with Shinto.”

As he spoke, the priest moved to stand before the model of Hikarijima within the archives.

"And so, most of the inhabitants of this island are... descendants of the thirty-six people and the shaman from that time. To think they would have had the nerve to increase to this many people. ...Of course, when you think of those thirty-six, it calls into question if we – the inhabitants of this island – are even human."

"...Don't say such scary things."

People of Earth were summoned to a parallel world and became heroes. It was a common theme in stories.

However, this was the opposite. In this case, an existence from another world was summoned to Earth. However, what was summoned was not a human nor a god, but a rocky mountain in the middle of the ocean.

Right... most likely, the summoner had entrusted the task of "cleansing the darkness" to that object.

"The soul of the island – my 'mission' always flows within me. Save the world, cleanse the darkness, it says. ...But it has no mind of its own. In the end, the island is the island, nothing more than a mass of rock. But that mission is carved deep into my soul. ...My father and his father before him single-handedly bore its voice and quietly passed on this truth to me. But why this happened all of a sudden... I haven't the slightest inkling."

That was what the priest said, but – to tell the truth, I had an idea.

"...It's because the island was connected to the rest of the world..."

"What did you say?"

"It was told to cleanse the darkness of the world, but until now, this mindless island with a soul didn't know the state of the world. But if it slowly became aware of the existence of the world, through books and literature transmitted through the island's inhabitants..."

"...In that case, wouldn't something like this have happened earlier?"

It was a logical question, but I shook my head.

“...It wouldn’t be able to learn of the ‘wideness’ of the world just through literature and phone calls and people coming and going by boat. But if there was some other way – if it had the chance to experience the world–”

As I spoke, the priest gazed at the tall steel tower a little ways away from us.

A large parabolic antenna was installed on top of the steel tower. Just for this moment, I glared hatefully at it, the symbol of broadband.

“...I see. And so the island grew to know of the ‘wideness’ of the world and entered the consciousness of the town’s people... That makes sense.”

According to the priest, the “soul” contained in the island had somehow planted various “images of heroes” within the island’s residents... and made it so that they themselves believed they were those heroes.

The heroes and legends did not only come from games and manga. To put it bluntly, even people like Momotarou and Ooka Echizen could be considered heroes. If they led lives like that, most humans could become heroes.

“So then... why aren’t you affected?”

“Naturally... it is because my role as a hero is that of this island’s priest. There is no need for me to change.”

I see. That would explain it.

But – in that case, I wished Maya had thought of her hero as being a priest too. If she did, she might not have left the island...

“Ah...”

When my thoughts reached that point, I asked the priest an important question. Right, this was important too.

“Um... so then, how do we turn everyone back to normal...”

“If I knew that, I would’ve used it a long time ago to get my daughter back.”

“...That’s true.”

I rested my arms on the glass case surrounding the model of the island and hung my head, enveloped in heartfelt despair.

‘Damn, after I’ve come this far... In the end I can’t do anything!’

When I ground my teeth in frustration, I heard the priest’s voice from behind me, his tone different from before.

“But... now I know how.”

“Huh!?”

My despair instantly changed to hope. I turned to face the priest, wearing a half-joyful smile – and froze.

The priest was smiling.

Just like Ikemoto’s and my mother’s, that unhesitating – and yet, unsettling smile.

The priest’s hand gripped a blood-covered knife – and he swung it down forcefully in my direction.

I was naïve.

I, who had tried to separate this current situation into simple words like hope and despair, was terribly naïve.

When I saw the blade shining red, a tension I had never felt before swept through my whole body–

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

The blood, the blood was overflowing.

It didn’t look like it would stop.

No, I wasn't talking about my body.

It seemed my leg had been injured, but it was shallower than I thought, and it wasn't bleeding profusely.

Right now, what was overflowing with blood that wouldn't stop flowing – was the wound in the priest's chest.

I remembered up to the point where there was a fierce struggle. I couldn't recall what had happened after that, as if I was lost in a daze.

But what was certain was that I had stabbed the priest... Maya's father, with my own hands.

"S-sir..."

"...You did it... Shouma-kun..."

"I didn't... no, uh... I... I..."

I couldn't put my thoughts in order, but I was calmed down by the twisted smile the priest showed me at that moment.

"With this, you have become 'darkness'."

"Huh...?"

"Yes, I figured it out. I know, having exposed myself to the soul of the island... Just now – you... were recognized... by this... island... as being... 'darkness'."

What was he saying?

More importantly, if I didn't stop the bleeding fast... that was what I logically thought, but my body would not move. All of my instincts urged me to take in what the priest had just said.

"What are you saying? What are you saying, sir!?! I thought you were the only sane one here, so why...! What do you mean by 'darkness'!?"

"You... are. Because... you killed me... a servant of Hikarijima... a hero of light... ah, the island, the soul of the island... has surely found, and recognized, its 'enemy'..."

"Wha..."

"And so... if you, the enemy... are killed by one of the 'heroes'... this ridiculous farce will... e...nd... and my daughter... Maya will... go back... to nor..."

I understood what he was trying to say.

I understood it so well it hurt.

But why? Why did it have to be me?

Right... to begin with, why was I the only one not a "hero"?

As if anticipating my question, the priest faced me and let the words fall from his lips.

"You... might... not... know, but... the blood... of this... island... does not... flow in... you. You were... born to... a pair... of university students... researching... the trench... and abandoned... in front... of the shrine....."

The priest stopped there, and no more words left his mouth.

...

There was no way.

There was just no way.

What was all that "You're not actually their real son," like something out of a cliché "hero story"!? Why did I have to... why... I wasn't anything like a h... yeah, I wasn't a hero. Right, it was the opposite. I didn't inherit the blood of heroes... I was the only one who didn't inherit the blood of heroes.

I was... “darkness”... I – I – was everyone’s enemy? I only... Maya... uh... I... killed... Maya’s father... huh? Wait, hold on. Hold on, hold on, hold on!

“A-anyway... I have to tell Maya’s mom...”

I was worried about what to say – when I suddenly realized. When he lunged at me, the priest’s knife was already covered in blood.

If the disaster that took place in my home and on the streets had also happened here...

Looking at the motionless priest, I suddenly became scared. A terror such as I had never felt before coursed through my whole body.

My body was gripped by uncontrollable nausea and my eyes overflowed with tears.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!

I could not give voice to my scream. The tears and snot stuck in my throat and I could not speak.

It might be easier to just go insane.

But the sharp pain that assaulted my leg forcefully anchored me to reality.

I would not be allowed to go insane.

It hurt.

The searing pain throbbed through my nerves.

Ah, this was no dream.

It wasn’t a dream.

It was reality. This pain – was undoubtedly real.

Why was I feeling nauseated?

Why was I crying so much?

Was it because I had no choice but to accept my mother's death as reality? Or was it because I had killed Maya's father with my own hands? Or perhaps, was it because I believed Maya's mother was most likely already dead?

I didn't know.

Right now, I – didn't know anything.

...

...No.

There was just one thing I did know.

I was an ordinary person without a speck of precognition.

Maya, a self-styled hero, had definitely told me so.

But you know, Maya?

I could still make a prophecy.

Yeah, there was just one prophecy I could make for certain.

'It's the end... for this island.'

...

...Maya.

Make some retort.

"That's not a prophecy, that's a prediction, Shouma."

...and point out my mistake, please.

Hey, Maya.

When our town got all crazy... when your family and friends were suffering and dying... what the hell kind of peace did you go off to protect?

Answer me. Help me.

Sir Hero of Light.

O servant of the god Nambaja, holy warrior of light!

"Maya..."

I dropped to my knees on the floor, leaning against the archive room's counter – and began to cry sorrowfully for a different reason than before.

I felt ashamed of myself for crying, and that made me cry all the more.

The fires in the direction of the city had multiplied, and the smell of blood and things burning was carried on the wind and reached even to the shrine.

Would I not go back anymore?

Could I not go back?

Who was I?

Who the hell was I?

No matter how much I thought, no answer was forthcoming. I just continued to cry in the center of the island.

All alone, as I imagined the face of my childhood friend who was no longer on this island–

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

Two days later

Saitama Prefecture, Tokorozawa, afternoon

“Wow. All the islanders have gone missing. Scary... I wonder what happened?”

A man, who had woken up past noon, muttered in a mystified voice as he looked at the newspaper’s front page.

That glasses-wearing man had a face no one could hate or even resent. Logically, that made it an “endearing face”. His features contained not a trace of disagreeableness.

There was nothing particularly notable about his face other than his glasses. It was a face that could accept anxiety, fear, and other people’s problems while still wearing an extremely bland expression.

The news article spoke of the rescue team that had been dispatched to Hikarijima a day after all contact had been lost. There was no sign of the islanders, and the town contained evidence of fighting between a great many people.

When the man turned on the TV, all but one of the stations were reporting on the incident, just as they would in the event of a huge calamity.

However, it was much more abnormal than any calamity. The afternoon variety shows were calling it a “Modern Day *Mary Celeste*” and stirring up anxiety.

It seemed little additional information was being broadcast on television, and they were simply repeating the same contents and images. Just when the man considered searching the Internet for more information – suddenly, the doorbell rang.

“Good afternoon. Um... it's nice to meet you.”

When he opened the door, a boy of about high school age was standing there. He was holding some sort of package in his hand, and he bowed his head.

“Excuse me, I... no, my name is Shouma Zakojima. I moved into the apartment next door this morning...”

A lightbulb went off in the man's head.

'Now that you mention it, last night the landlord the next building over suddenly said there would be a new tenant.'

“This is *hikkoshi soba*.”

“Oh, how polite. Thank you.”

As he accepted the proffered package, the man gave a brief introduction to his new “neighbor”.

“I'm Shinkichi Hariyama. Er, I'm part of the neighborhood association... I'm a work-from-home designer and I'm here even on weekdays, so if you need anything, feel free to ask.”

He was not simply pretending to be polite. He truly wished for the boy to “feel free to ask,” even to the point of recklessness.

Hearing that, the boy replied, relieved, “All right! Thank you very much!”

Upon receiving that unusually energetic reply, Hariyama-san casually asked the boy, “You look about the same age as my daughter... are you a student?”

“No...”

The boy shook his head a bit sadly. In the next moment, he smiled and spoke in a voice full of confidence.

“I double as – a hero and a demon king.”

He wore a puzzled expression, but it looked like he didn't think of me as being "off in the head". He seemed to be a bit too carefree, but I was grateful for that.

Even though the man who introduced himself as Hariyama-san was the head of the household, he was younger than I had thought. I wouldn't have imagined he had a child around my age.

But right now, I should be thinking about what I would do from now on, rather than the people around me.

Back then, I escaped from the island – and right away I reached this land, "Tokorozawa". It was a city in Saitama Prefecture, famous for being the home of the Seibu Lions.

It wasn't like I came here for no reason.

I felt it.

Some sort of unusual aura.

I noticed it when I left the island, but I could feel that the island had a unique sort of aura. I felt the same sort of aura from the island's people.

And I felt it in this town, just like the island where I grew up – the aura of something not of this world, something that had come from another world.

But it wasn't exactly the same as the aura I felt in Hikarijima. Maybe it was something else from another world different from the one the island had been summoned from. The "aura" felt very similar.

I had no other clues, and so there was little else I could do. For now, I would stay here.

Yeah, I was gradually beginning to feel the "island's" aura.

It was a nostalgic aura. It belonged to everyone from the island.

It was the aura of a “hero of light”.

It was still very, very far away, but I felt it growing closer to me, little by little. Somehow, it seemed my ability to sense auras far surpassed theirs.

Yeah, if I wanted to avoid fighting, it would be best to move from place to place around the world, constantly on the run.

But I would stay in this town. I would tell them where I was. So that the heroes, everyone from the island, would come to kill me.

Someday, in due time, Maya would come to kill me-

If that happened, I could meet her. I would be able to meet Maya again.

And then I would confess. The person who came to kill me, who came to stab me through the chest with the sacred sword of Nambaja... I would hug her.

I would hug her so, so tightly.

And then I would yell that I loved her.

Over. And over.

Even when Maya’s sword pierced through my heart.

I wouldn’t allow anyone to get in my way. I would continue to wait for Maya, no matter how many other heroes I had to kill.

I did not feel that dispatching of “heroes” was a crime. After all, my hands were already stained with blood.

I’d already killed about ten more people before leaving the island. There were those I recognized among them.

But I was desperate. If that situation was caught on film, the judge would definitely rule it to be self-defense. That was how dangerous it was.

However... each time I killed a hero, I felt like the "aura" emanating from my body grew thicker. It was as if I was sucking up the souls of the murdered heroes... Even so, I definitely wasn't overflowing with power.

"So I'm – the hero of darkness, huh? No, or maybe I'm the demon king."

Gazing at the sky, I pulled out the letter Maya had left behind from my pocket. I'd read it countless times, over and over, and it was already worn and ragged.

On the second piece of stationery, the following was written.

"I think I'll probably leave this island soon. I don't know if it's real, but I have to cleanse the darkness. To put it simply, I have to defeat something kind of like a demon king.

I don't know if that kind of being really exists, and I might never come back.

No. Sorry. I'll come back.

I'll definitely come back.

So I have a favor to ask.

I'm going to protect the world's peace, so Shouma, I want you to protect the people of the island. In particular, I want you to comfort and protect my father and mother after I'm gone.

Sorry. It's shameless of me to ask this of you, but... I'll pay you back if I come back safely, definitely!

So when that happens – I want you to tell me.

What you think of me, Shouma –"

The letter ended there.

I read that part after I left the island.

...After I had killed Maya's father with my own hands.

In the end, I didn't write a reply to the letter I received from Maya. I didn't know her address anyway, so there was nothing I could do.

Right now, she was traveling around Japan or the world. She was looking for the "avatar of darkness" that she had to destroy.

In other words – she was looking for me.

I was engulfed in unbearable loneliness, and to hide that feeling, I composed a letter.

Within my heart, I continued to furiously write to the "heroes of light" who would appear before me.

Without pen or paper, simply carving the words into my heart.

I continued to carve my current feelings as wounds upon my heart.

Dear Sir Hero of Light,

I will now kill you.

I will kill all of you.

I will kill many of you.

That is what I wish for.

But, you know.

It's fine, right?

Whenever heroes of light die, churches and temples and kings and gods bring them back to life.

So I can kill you without worry.

I am the hero of darkness. And I am the demon king.

So if I die just once, I definitely won't come back to life.

So I have to raise my level more and more.

Give me quests.

Please, give me more quests-

I am normal.

On that island, I was the only one who was normal.

So I will definitely stay...

Sane!

I'm not crazy!

I'm just in love with Maya.

I just love someone.

So I'm sane.

Hey, isn't that right, Maya?

Isn't that right, Sir Hero of Light?

I'm normal.

I'm definitely normal.

Give me quests.

Please, give me more quests-

“Dear Sir Hero of Light” – end

Notes:

[1] A bit of oddness in the writing here that's hard to get across. For a little while now, Shouma has been inconsistently writing words in hiragana that he's previously used kanji for – so basically, instead of the more complicated Chinese characters, he switches to a simpler syllabary. This is especially evident in this sentence, where there are almost no kanji at all. I attribute it to shock and the deterioration of his mental state, but it's difficult to display the same effect in English.

[2] This is all over references to other *Dengeki Bunko* series. “Mayonnai Kingdom” is from *Bludgeoning Angel Dokuro-chan*. The “shrine hospital” is 内陣会病院, which as far as I can tell is something to do with Gakuto Coda's *Missing* series, which I don't know anything at all about, much less what it's actually referring to. Descended from *kirin* isn't one I'm familiar with either, but it's easy enough to understand. “Imagine Breaker” is from *A Certain Magical Index*.

HARIYAMA-SAN, CENTER OF THE MIRACLES (GENRE "MEDLEY")

奇跡の中心、針山さん

・ジャンル《メドレー》



Part 1

Hey, Muu.

“What is it, Lulu?”

Have you heard... this urban legend?

“Which one?”

You know... the story about... the back-alley demon king...

One time, a bunch of delinquents gathered in an alleyway picked a fight with a single boy.

The delinquents tried to intimidate him into giving up his money, but the boy quietly asked, “...Are you guys heroes?”

Was he crazy? When the delinquents exchanged glances, a salaryman who looked completely out of place in the alleyway yelled, “I am a hero! Release those poor innocent civilians, you demon!”

They thought he was calling them demons, but the delinquents immediately realized they were wrong.

In his hand, the salaryman clutched a large knife such as would be used on a camping trip – and its tip was pointed straight at the boy.

The delinquents were overcome by an ominous feeling and fled, but–

They immediately heard a scream coming from the alleyway. However, they realized that it was not the boy’s voice, but the salaryman’s.

And when they timidly returned to the alleyway, there was no longer anyone there. All that was to be found was the salaryman’s knife... and a large pool of blood spreading across the ground.

The delinquents stiffened reflexively at the strange sight. That dull, emotionless voice weighed coldly on their minds.

“Are you guys... heroes?”

According to rumor, the salaryman was a lunatic who played too many online games and had completely lost his ability to differentiate between games and reality. On the other hand, the boy who was killing those would-be “heroes” was another lunatic who also played online games, but as a player killer who targeted other players – one feared by heroes as the so-called “demon king”.

The murders repeated over and over.

Until the day the heroes defeated the demon king, over and over.

Until the day the level-up chime reached the demon king’s ears in the real world, over and over–

So, Muu. There’s something about this urban legend that makes it really different from all the others, right?

“...What’s so different about it?”

This urban legend... is only popular in our town... only in Tokorozawa. I looked it up on the Internet... but it hasn’t spread at all. It’s not mentioned on any urban legend sites.

“...But there are rumors about it in this town.”

Right. So... this urban legend has only just been born.

Maybe... even now, in this town... this urban legend–

Part 2

A warehouse under the jurisdiction of the Amida-gumi

“Is this really the right warehouse?”

In response to the man’s uneasy query, the woman beside him answered immediately.
“...Yes, there’s no mistaking it.”

Night had long ago fallen here on the outskirts of Tokorozawa. Unlike the town, which was filled with light and the clamor of people, this road was only sparsely lined with streetlamps and was completely enveloped in darkness and silence.

Within that darkness, several people were lined up in front of a building with a man at their center. Save for this man, all were female, and each and every one of them had a distinctly non-Japanese face. If one were to ask which country they were from, even that was not evident from their faces; it would be most accurate to say they were faces with no nationality.

“Damn... why do we have to sneak around like common thieves!? The person truly at fault here is... No, that little girl can’t even be called a person, and she’s living without a care in the world!”

“Please calm down.”

However, their conversation was unmistakably in Japanese, and the phrases the man spoke with an irritated expression were unmistakably those of a Japanese.

The man somehow calmed down, thanks to the women who seemed to be his subordinates. However, he spat out without bothering to hide his usual sullen expression, “We don’t have records in this country! We’ve even gone so far as working in illegal pubs just to survive! Those young hoodlums worked us to the bone!”

“...Though we were the ones who did all the work.”

Ignoring the woman’s calm rebuttal, the man quietly turned to face the warehouse.

“...Anyway, this is the right place?”

"No, we haven't been able to confirm it. However, we have concluded that those hooligans hid all of our precious tools within this warehouse. ...In addition, we checked the landfill proximate to the Amida-gumi territory, but they are not something that could be discarded there. They are not of a substance that can be incinerated, so there is no need to worry that they have been disposed of in that manner."

"I see... At any rate, we must recover our 'staffs' at any cost. Even if they were cut clean in two, they should not have lost their abilities as catalysts of magical power."

Magical power.

The man suddenly spoke those words far removed from reality, blurting out something that transcended the ordinary world and veered into the absurd.

The context itself was normal enough, but he continued to expand on those words, about something that did not exist anywhere on Earth.

"Those staffs are absolutely essential to return to... ♪ ... ルフ ... our homeland."

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

A lone young man picked up his cell phone as he observed the strange group from afar.

His face and demeanor were still that of a boy, and his bleached hair was covered by a knit cap. A skateboard was leaning against the wall beside him. Wearing an indecipherable smile, he opened his mouth.

"Chief~ Chief~ Those guys went into the Amida-gumi's warehouse."

There was a momentary silence – and then a low voice came from the other end of the line.

"...Got it. I thought they were suspicious, but they're with the Amida-gumi, huh. ...They kinda remind me of the brat who blew up the office, so I figured maybe..."

"Hey. If the Amida-gumi's picking up guys from weird countries, maybe they're, uh, what's the word? Spies? They're spies, right? S'what you call 'em, right? Anyway, maybe that's what they are. ...But, Chief. Did a weird brat seriously jump through the

window and blow up the office with bombs? Seriously? She wasn't just pretending with a gas line break or something?"

The youth cackled as he spoke, and the man, his boss, replied on the phone. "If you weren't such a talented little shit, you'd be sinking in Tama Lake for that comment just now. ...Anyway, let's get serious. Grab 'em the second they step out of that warehouse."

"Got it. ...Hup."

With a complete lack of seriousness, the skateboarder man hung up and turned around, smiling brightly. "Okay, time to get to work. We won't be killing them, but I'm still looking forward to hearing what they're gonna squeal."

Behind him, a number of youths were lined up in the alleyway as if hiding. One of them had a skateboard in one hand, like the young man who had been on the phone, while his other hand toyed with a long-handled folding knife.

The knife-wielding boy cracked his neck and muttered in a slightly dissatisfied voice, "It's 'cause we didn't finish off that Ginjima last time, huh?"

"Yeah. That was my bad. Sorry, sorry."

The young man on the phone, who appeared only a little older than the knife-wielding boy, withdrew a black object from his pocket and, smiling, began to reminisce.

"I should've... shot him right through the head."

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

"If they're not in this warehouse, that leaves no choice but that mansion..."

"Though I want to avoid that at all costs..."

The ones conversing uneasily as they trespassed into the warehouse were the "land of magic"'s warden and his female subordinates.

After their clash with the Amida-gumi, they had lost the staffs that acted as catalysts to allow them to perform magic, not to mention their magic itself, and they were even unable to return to their own world. If they didn't return, other government officials might have realized something was wrong, but if they themselves didn't use magic, the others would not be able to pinpoint their exact location. Back then, they had sensed Number 893's magical power and had rushed to come here, leaving only the name of the country of "Japan" in the official documents – and so their precise coordinates would not be known to those in the other world.

Considering it rationally, it was an unthinkable blunder on the part of the government officials. However, crimes almost never occurred and most problems were solved by magic. It was only natural that they were lacking that sense of caution.

In the end, they of unknown nationality were rounded up by one of the touts in town and ended up working at one of the foreigner pubs, but–

They withstood it for several weeks.

Using the information they had steadily gathered about the Amida-gumi, they finally snuck into this warehouse.

"There... There they are!"

They couldn't simply turn on the lights and instead spent a few minutes searching with flashlights. After a short time, one of the women called out, surprising even herself.

"What!?"

They hadn't thought they would find what they sought so quickly within the unusually complex warehouse. The black suit-clad "warden" cried out, his voice a mix of surprise and joy.

When he rushed over, the guardswoman pulled out a jute bag that had been carelessly tossed atop a shelf. The warden shone his flashlight into the bag. The "staffs" they used really were contained within, but they were still cleaved in two.

"Okay... Well? How are they? Can they amplify magic?"

At the warden's words, the guardswoman held the staff for a while, concentrating, but...



"It's no use... In this state, it can't even amplify half as much as usual. Spatial translocation is impossible. However, it is possible that it will repair itself, given enough time."

The warden looked slightly dejected at his subordinate's slow confession. However, he shook his head and decided to look on the bright side. "...I see. But this is good enough for now. We're fortunate enough that they may repair themselves. All right... on to our next order of business. Isn't there anything we can use as criminal evidence? If we find anything, we'll tip off the police as retaliation against that man and Number 893."

He thought up a rather petty revenge, perhaps because he had not grown used to living in the human world.

"I still don't know much about this country's laws, but it's probably enough if it comes out they have some kind of drugs or too many weapons..."

With that in mind, he cast his gaze over their surroundings and realized there was an axe left atop one of the other shelves. "An axe, huh... There's nothing else it can be but a lethal weapon."

As he looked at the axe, which had a short blade but a long handle-

He opened his mouth to summon the guardswomen searching elsewhere in the warehouse, but-

In the next instant, before the man could call out, a sharp scream echoed through the building.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"...W-What's wrong!?"

Startled, the warden and the other guardswomen ran toward the source of the scream. The warehouse contained many shelves laid out in a complicated fashion and the scream came from the very back. They opened a door hidden behind the shelves. Before them was one of the guardswomen, who had sunk to the floor, unable to stand.

"What is it...?"

At the sound of the warden's voice, the guardswoman, her teeth chattering, squeezed out her words, her gaze never leaving what lay beyond the door. "Uh, um, behind the shelves... I found a hidden door! A-And then, I thought maybe this was the place, so I opened the door and—!"

"...?"

Without waiting to hear the end of her explanation, the warden shone his flashlight on what lay beyond the door.

"...Huh!?"

And what he saw was-

The figure of a human tied to a chair, agony carved into every inch of his body.

"W-Who... is this?"

"I-I don't know!"

The person was so covered in wounds that one couldn't tell at first glance if he was male or female, but it could be deduced from his build that he was male. What was most unusual was that thick chains were wrapped around his body, tied to what seemed to be water pipes that ran through the room, shelves, and stakes driven into the floor. There were also huge burn scars running from his head down his back, and deep wounds from a blade were left on his shoulders and his legs. The bleeding looked to be forcibly stopped with bandages, and gangrene was beginning to set in his injuries. In addition, there were wounds across his body that seemed to be from some kind of torture device. In the darkness, he could be mistaken for a zombie.

"A-Anyway, murder is a felony in this country. We found evidence of a much bigger crime than I expected..."

Before, the warden had told Number 893 they would "burn the Amida-gumi to death" to torment her, but even though this was a different world, he actually didn't have the courage, resolve, or motivation to commit murder. He could be infinitely cruel to the

praying mantis and the girl born of magic, but he balked when it came to humans. It was in his nature. In the end, he was on the “side of the law” in the land of magic, and when something like this was brought before him, he was more than a little shaken.

And then, as if to top off the situation-

“Ugh... Ahh, ugh, uhh, ahh...” A faint moan emerged from the mouth of the corpselike man.

“!?”

“W-Warden! H-H-He’s still alive!?”

Even though abnormal events kept unfolding one after another, and even though the warden was surprised that the thing in front of him was not a corpse, deep within his heart, he felt relieved.

‘Is he a debtor or something kidnapped by the Amida-gumi? Or an investigator who infiltrated their group, or maybe someone from an enemy organization?’

In any case, if he was an enemy of the Amida-gumi, he might be of use to them if they healed him or he might provide information. With that in mind, the warden held out the jute bag to his subordinate guardswomen and issued an order.

“Good timing... How well are these broken staffs able to amplify magical power? We’ll try casting healing magic on this man. ...Let’s try having four of us each hold one staff fragment and combine our magic. We may be able to output approximately the original power of one staff.”

However... there was something they did not consider.

The possibility that the man in front of them was even more dangerous than the Amida-gumi or Number 893.

To them, the Amida-gumi were law-breaking evildoers. They believed healing and releasing the Amida-gumi’s enemy would be to their advantage only because they were from the “land of magic”, where crimes were few to begin with.

In any case, using a power foreign to this world, the warden and his companions healed the body of the man still bound by chains, who was beyond the ability of modern medicine to treat.

And then—

The man silently opened his eyes.

The serial killer who had once plunged the city into terror opened his eyes.

Along with a greater madness than ever before, fed by the pain and fear imposed on him during his punishment by the Amida-gumi.

Along with a healed, abnormally strong body, forged by the melding together of warped magical power—

—◆◆◆—

“Got it? Pin ‘em down as soon as the door opens. There are four women and one man. It’ll be easy, huh?”

Laughing lightly, the young man with the gun gave orders to the youths who stood around the entrance to the warehouse. The boy with the knife continued to spin it around expressionlessly, but the other youths surrounded the entrance with no wasted movements, quieted down, and listened to what was going on inside the building. At first glance, they appeared to be behaving normally, but the atmosphere around them clearly differed from that of respectable people, and their eyes gleamed as if in anticipation of bloodshed.

And thus they would again complete their job without any mercy or hesitation. Someone might end up dying in the end, but their orders were not to kill, just to capture the five, and so there was no need for guilt.

As the gun-wielding youth looked at his subordinates, he was convinced that they would be able to complete this job without any problems.

However – at that moment, his conviction was destroyed by a thunderous roar.

GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAoaaaaaaaAoooooooaaaaaaaAooooooo
AAAAAAAo0000oooooooAAAAAAAooooooo

At first he thought it was a siren or something, but it was undoubtedly a human voice. It was a shout that did not contain anger, sadness, or fear.

An unnatural shriek resounded from within the warehouse, someone screaming emotionlessly at the top of his lungs, so loudly it could be heard dozens of feet away.

“What was that!?”

The shrieks became disjointed as they drew closer to the entrance of the warehouse and ceased completely several meters away, enveloping them in a brief silence. It was no longer a situation in which they could afford to relax. The young man withdrew his gun from his pocket and prepared himself to fire shots into the warehouse at any moment. The knife boy also lightly gripped the knife he had been toying with and halted a little ways away from the rest of the group, as if observing the situation.

However, their goal had not changed. They just had to capture the people who emerged from the entrance by any means necessary. The youths held their breaths as the tension mounted and concentrated all of their senses on the door, the only exit to the warehouse.

And then – “he” leapt out, as if to ridicule them. Not from the door – but from the adjacent wall, smashing through it from inside the warehouse.

“!?”

Before the youths could adjust their stances, “he” who had leapt out from inside swung his arms wildly. In the next moment, red liquid splattered against the wall, painting it with an expanse of red dots.

“Aaaaaaaah!?” One of the youths who had surrounded the entrance screamed. His sleeves were rolled up; there was blood gushing uncontrollably from one of his arms.

"He" did not flinch at the spurt of blood; rather, it was as if the sight of blood only spurred him on, and "he" swung his arms even faster. At the same moment, another youth screamed, and a new pattern of dots was painted across the wall.

The youths with the gun and the knife, watching from a slight distance, were able to calmly analyze the appearance of the man who had jumped out of the warehouse. He was clad in tattered rags and was not of large build. They couldn't make out his face through the darkness of the night and his wild movements, but they knew what he held in his hand.

It was an axe with a long handle, such as could be bought at a home improvement center. A strong person would wield it with both hands for outdoor activities, but the man in front of them was using it as a weapon against them.

They didn't know why such a person had come out from inside the warehouse. He was clearly different from the people who had entered, and they couldn't assume that he had been using the warehouse.

What was certain was that the shriek from before had come from this man.

And that at this rate, their panicked subordinates would be completely annihilated.

The young man with the gun and the boy with the knife reached this conclusion at the same time and immediately took action, so as to complete the job assigned to them.

The boy stepped up beside the axe man, weaving through a momentary opening, and gouged the man's side with his knife while his arms were raised overhead. The axe man's movements stopped for a second, and without missing a beat, the young man fired off several shots from where he stood a short distance away.

There was no time to attach a silencer, and the loud bangs of gunfire echoed into the night sky. Several bullets embedded themselves in the axe man's back; each time a red hole was drilled into him, his body shuddered, the axe still held aloft.

000000ooooooooooooAAAaaa000000ooooooooooooAAAooooooo
ooo0000000oooo—

Still, the man did not fall. They thought he would scream just as he had before, when—

He glared at the young man with the gun and the boy with the knife as if memorizing their faces and disappeared into the night with startling vigor, moving with a speed that surpassed human limits. In addition to the way he had previously broken through the wall, the young man with the gun was so dumbfounded at the man's physical prowess that he even forgot to give chase. The knife boy checked on the youths who had been cut by the axe, but it seemed none had died instantly. He glanced at the youth with the gun, as if to ask whether they should call an ambulance or treat them themselves, but—

As he twirled his gun, the corners of the young man's mouth were more twisted than before – he was smiling.

"Well, ain't this fun?"

"...Bro?"

It was unclear they were really brothers or whether it was an honorary title. In any case, the young man with the gun smiled at the knife boy who addressed him as an older brother, as if truly enjoying himself.

"Listen up. We were just **passing by here**. But one of those Amida-gumi bastards jumped out of their warehouse – suddenly started swinging an axe around, cut down our friends, and ran off. Even though we didn't do anything."

The boy held his silence, perhaps understanding what the young man was saying, and once again began to spin the knife in his hand.

"We've got an excuse for **Chief** and **Boss**. An' just like that, we've got the perfect setup to get *revenge* on the Amida-gumi... on Ginjima, right? ...The guys in the group can do what they want with that. Yeah, and that axe guy... Well, just leave him for now."

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

Tokorozawa, a certain back alley

I sense it. Close, close, really close by. A little, just a little more.

'Great god Nambaja.'

'After I left the island... I saw it on the news. Hikarijima... To think such a thing would happen on Hikarijima... They said everyone's disappeared, but they've just been kidnapped, right? Isn't that right? Great god Nambaja.'

'Letmuj's demons are here in this city. We will clash at night. I – and the seeds of darkness that have taken root in the world.'

'Please. Please give me strength. Please give me the strength to save the world... everyone on the island, and my mother and father.'

'No, just one person is enough... Even if it's just Shouma... please give me the power to save him.'

'...I know I'm asking something incredibly greedy. I'm prioritizing the safety of one person over world peace. But... but! Oh, please, forgive me one selfish act, just this once. Great god Nambaja.'

As she soliloquized, the girl – Maya Isojima – ran through the night. However, to the girl, her soliloquy was a full-fledged conversation with the great god Nambaja. But to anyone else, the god named Nambaja was nothing but complete and utter nonsense.

The first time she heard the god's voice, she had already begun to realize that something abnormal was happening within her. It was on that night she wrote a letter to a boy, her childhood friend... Shouma, to whom she had not confessed her feelings.

The moment she had heard the god's voice, she truly awakened. Just as if everything that had happened to her up to now had been a dream, she had felt that "saving the world was her duty," mingled with a sense of doubt; it was carved into her heart just as if it had been her destiny from even before the moment of her birth.

Along with imaginary memories of her past life.

And now the god's voice was echoing within her mind, just as it had back then.

"Take hold of your blade of light. Cleave through and purify the magic of Letmuj, the darkness that leads people astray and obscures the light, in every age that has passed and every age to come."

The decree was quite roundabout and difficult to understand, but Maya understood perfectly what it was that she was meant to do.

She sensed the presence of darkness close by.

She would use every last ounce of her strength to repel the darkness waiting in these alleys.

'Even if it costs me my life.'

At about the same time as she confirmed her resolve, she was able to determine the exact location of the darkness. If she turned at the next corner, she would find herself in an alley containing no signs of life. The buildings on either side might have been factories or might have been something else. There was no way anyone other than herself would be walking around here.

'Shouma... I have to save Shouma...'

As the god's voice resounded in her head and brought back the "memories of her past life", Maya's memories of living on the island and the memories of all her experiences had immediately been locked away in a corner of her mind. Even so, she could still clearly remember the face of the boy she had gotten along with in her childhood.

The boy who had risked his own life to save her when she had been attacked by a stray dog.

Maya had become a hero who would save the world. If Maya was the world's hero, then her own hero was none other than Shouma.

'Shouma... Please, give me strength—'

She rounded the corner, imagining his face – and there, her punishment awaited.

The god Nambaja brought divine punishment upon her, who had dared to ask some other being to grant her power. Whether it was by design or sheer coincidence, no one would ever know.

When she turned the corner, what she saw straight ahead, in the alley illuminated by streetlamps, was—

—◆◆◆—

Blood sprayed out under the streetlamps.

Several kilometers away from the heart of the city, in a back alley halfway between the woods and the residential areas, Shouma Zakojima smashed in a man's head with an iron pipe.

The first blow was a direct hit right above his eyes, and as the body bent back and turned over, he delivered the next blow to the back of the head facing him.

After that was easy. Shouma struck the other man's temple with the folded end of the iron pipe as he lay collapsed on the ground. He didn't give him time to shield his head with his hands or crouch facedown. Of course, it seemed he had already sustained a concussion from the first blow: the "hero" was no longer moving. Even so, Shouma continued to swing the iron pipe.

Over

And over

And over

And over and over and over and over and over

He swung down the iron pipe rhythmically. Each time a dull thump rang out, red liquid splattered across the rusted silver surface, until it was no longer recognizable as an iron pipe.

Finally the thumping sounds became squishing sounds, and the “hero”, who had collapsed face-up, stopped breathing. Once he was completely sure that his opponent was dead, Shouma let the iron pipe hang lifelessly toward the ground.

As he stood under the streetlamps, covered in the back spatter of blood, Shouma silently looked down at the body and pondered.

What would he do with the corpse? Should he hide it?

'It doesn't need to stay hidden until morning.'

The boy mulled over the same questions as always as he slowly ran his eyes across the body.

'It's fine as long as it isn't found overnight.'

The boy considered such strange things and reached out, thinking of carrying the body to the woods nearby.

In that instant, Shouma heard footsteps behind him. They were a little ways away, but the moment the footsteps stopped, he heard someone breathing hard. They had most likely run here and stopped the moment they turned the corner.

'Who is it? A civilian? No, there shouldn't be anyone jogging here at this time of night.'

He tried to figure out the other person's identity without turning around. Normally he would be able to feel the aura of Hikarijima, but right now the corpse at his feet still clogged the air with the scent of Hikarijima and he couldn't tell for sure. If they were a normal person, he should just run away without showing his face, right? But if they were a new “hero” – then he had to finish them off right here and now.

The moment he decided he had to wait for them to react, the intruder yelled so quickly there was really no need to wait. It was the speech of a hero, loud and majestic.

“...Hold it right there! Evil demon of Letmuj! In the name of Nambaja, tonight you shall return to the void from whence you came!”

'?

? !?

? ...! ? ??!!? !??!??!!? !??!??!?!?!!? !??!??!

!!??!?!??!?!??!?!??!?!??!?!'

In a single instant, his heart was thrown into confusion. He stood still as if time had frozen.

First the voice had assaulted his ears. Then the word Nambaja, which he couldn't forget even if he wanted to, had reached his eardrums. And then – it had shown clear hostility towards him, but the moment he heard that voice, everything else ceased to affect him.

It really took just a moment.

Tears spilled from his eyes before he even understood what was going on in his own heart. His vision immediately blurred, reflecting the twinkle twinkle twinkle of the streetlamps, and his world filled with dazzling light.

The next thing he knew, the iron pipe had fallen to the ground with a clatter. His sole weapon left his hand, rolling to a stop against the head of the "hero" he had just killed a moment ago.

But he no longer cared about any of that.

Or that his childhood friend had slandered him and called him a demon.

Or even that the girl might kill him after this.

He turned around.

Slowly, slowly, so as not to break this moment, even if it was nothing but a dream.

Silently, the boy turned and looked at the girl – Maya Isojima – with tears streaming down his face.

"Finally.... We finally meet, Maya."

“Huh....?”

When she saw the face illuminated by the streetlamps, Maya froze for a moment.

The voice that called her name was familiar, an unforgettable reverberation. And the face that had given voice to those words – it was a face damp with tears, the face of the “hero” that she had been imagining not long ago.

In the next moment, her heart accelerated.

Maybe, if this had been Hikarijima—

The girl would have rushed over to him, tears streaming down her own face, and said with her very best smile, “I’m home.”

Maybe, if she did not sense the evil aura emanating from his body—

She would have confessed her feelings for him frankly.

Maybe, if there had not been a bloody corpse lying at his feet—



She would have held his hand tightly. So that she would feel the warmth of a human. So that she would feel with her own hands the proof that Shouma was alive and well.

Only the reality laid out before her pierced through and shattered the girl's heart.

"Shou...ma?"

Her voice was shaky. The girl realized that her whole body was trembling, not just her voice. She was completely unable to accept the reality she was presented with.

However, the girl was not even given the time to hesitate.

[Destroy him.]

As if to forcibly coerce the confused girl, the "god" telepathically instructed her in an emotionless voice. Firmly, firmly, more forcefully than ever before. At the same time, she felt the dark aura from Shouma's body grow even more pronounced. It was as if it was responding to the god's voice echoing within her heart alone.

[Destroy him and the world will be freed from darkness.]

'Wait, please wait, Great God Nambaja. What... What is the meaning of this!?'

However, the voice only repeated the same words and made no response to her question.

'Maybe the boy in front of me is an imposter.'

Just now, she had been imagining Shouma's face. Maybe the demon had read her mind and assumed that form to appear before her. Even as she hoped that was it, Maya was completely puzzled by the tears running down his cheeks.

Was he under a spell? In that case, would she be able to break it? Maybe Shouma, who had been spirited away from the island, was just being manipulated?

Maya formulated several possibilities and courses of action, but she was forgetting an important fact. No, it might have been more accurate to say she had completely rejected the idea.

'If he... If Shouma really is a demon.

'If Shouma was the one who kidnapped everyone on the island.'

She once again found herself unable to consider the explanation that should have been the first to come to mind.

[Now, cleave through and purify the earth sullied by the avatar of darkness and bring light to the world.]

But the god's voice bore down upon her heart even more strongly, as if to scold her.

It was no longer anything but noise. The noise echoed through her whole body to destroy her heart, which doubted the god's words.

As if noticing her distress, the thing in front of her which had taken Shouma's form wiped at his tears with both hands and quietly began to speak. "...Oh, finally... You've finally come, Maya."

The voice she had wanted to hear. The smile she had wanted to see. All of it was right in front of her, but instead, it terrified and bemused her.

"The fruit knife you're holding... Is that your holy sword, Maya?" The boy took a step closer to her as he murmured in a quiet voice.

The aura he emanated and the confusion within her escalated, and Maya jumped back without thinking. "Don't... Don't come any closer!"

“ ”

"You... W-Who are you? You look like Shouma, but... you're not Shouma! Because, when I left the island, I didn't feel such an evil aura from Shouma...! And... And Shouma would never kill anyone!"

Rather than making the logical conclusion from the situation before her, Maya's voice as she spoke was laden with her own hopes. As if to fashion them into the truth, and – praying that the real Shouma was still safe.

"You've taken Shouma's form and intend to kill me, right...? How... Just how many humans have you killed with that same trick...!? ...You killed that man there the same way, didn't you!? By changing into someone important to him... like the way you look to me now!"

Faced with his childhood friend who spouted words even she could not have believed, Shouma smiled quietly. And then he withdrew an envelope from his pocket and held it out toward her.

The envelope was familiar to her. But she had completely forgotten about the existence of the envelope until just now. Just before she had heard the god's voice, she had written out her feelings in a letter to Shouma and placed it inside that envelope.

Why did I forget about it until now? Why did I even write those things to begin with? I questioned the great god Nambaja. Even though Nambaja has always watched over and protected us, even in our past lives.

'But what I wrote in that letter... My feelings toward Shouma haven't changed...'

Though she once again affirmed the feelings she harbored toward her childhood friend, she felt a chill run through her at the fact that the letter was held by the evil before her.

The thought crossed her mind: it couldn't be. What if the evil in front of her really was Shouma, in the flesh?

"...You know, I... read this letter." As if reading her mind, the boy slowly began to speak. His eyes were filled with something akin to regret, or perhaps it was pity for Maya.

"But... sorry. It was already too late when I read it... So I wasn't able to carry out your request, Maya."

Not understanding what he meant, Maya recalled the details of what she had written in the letter. The moment a certain line came to mind, a sudden anxiety welled up within her.

And the evil slowly spoke up, as if to give life to that anxiety. "Maya, your father and mother are already—"

"Stop! Are you—are you still trying to confuse me!? Where... where is the real Shouma!?"

"...I am the real Shouma. But... I've become the evil you're talking about. ...No, maybe I should say I was made into it. By... that **Hikarijima**."

Maya didn't drop her guard at the evil's strange words, instead holding the small knife at the ready. But she was unable to bring herself to charge toward the wide-open evil and instead continued to listen to him speak with a serious expression.

But that calmness came to an end with his next words.

"Ever since... the old man... Ever since I killed your father, Maya."

"__!"

Killed.

The corpse at his feet lent an inarguable reality to that absurd word. Maya's body froze up for just an instant, and then, her eyes blank, she opened her mouth.

"...You're lying."

'No. No no no. There's no way this is Shouma! It can't be Shouma! This guy – everything he says is a lie!'

"I'm not lying. I killed your father, Maya. And I'm the real... no, it doesn't matter if I'm a fake. It's not really related to this. And, your mother... she's probably... dead too—"

"Stoooooop!"

Lies [light] [light] lies
[light] lies [light] lies [light] lies [light] lies [light] lies [light] lies [light] lies [light] lies

The god's warped voice fell into sync with her own heart and twisted her disarrayed thoughts in one particular direction.

However, it did nothing but return her to her previous goal.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Maya raised her voice, which was incredibly weak compared to the other hero's – and pointed the knife in her hand and charged straight forward.

The “demon” made no attempt to avoid it, spreading his arms wide and awaiting her arrival. But Maya’s eyes were already shut tight as she charged and she could no longer see the figure of her old friend.

Just when it seemed the short blade would be plunged into his chest, the demon murmured with a gentle smile:

“Ah, so this will end it”

However... those words were swallowed up by a moan from behind him.

“Wo...man...”

In the next instant, the demon sensed the weak aura behind him. It was not a hero. Shouma could not sense the aura of a hero. But it was an aura distinct from that of a human. When he'd left Hikarijima, the strange "power" he'd sensed in this town... A sharp, heavy power, similar to the one that had made him come to this town, flared up behind him.

“...Huh?”

The moment he spoke, the demon was swept sideways and sent flying.

Hearing the sound of the attack, Maya opened her eyes without thinking–

“Woooooooooooooaaaaaaaan.”

Shouma's figure, which had been standing before her up until now, had vanished – and in his place, she saw a ghastly man who looked nothing like Shouma, facing her and raising an axe high into the air.

'Oh, good.'

As she looked at the line of silver heading towards her, Maya only smiled vacantly.

'I knew it... That just now was only a fake Shouma.'

Carried forward by momentum, the girl was unable to stop. And as if the body struck by the axe was his own–

“Mayaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

The boy's scream and the spurt of blood from the girl's body simultaneously whirled through the back alley.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

A certain place in Tokorozawa, Amida-gumi residence

The axe man had fled.

Upon receiving that report, Ginjima had mobilized the members of the Amida-gumi in pursuit of the axe man.

“Damn... the hell is this?”

Ginjima mulled over what they would do now as he stood on standby in the Amida-gumi mansion on the outskirts of Tokorozawa.

‘We really should've ended it fast...'

The axe man had concealed himself in Shibazato's home and gone after his life. Shibazato and the others had caught him, and after that they had punished him “just a little bit” in one of their warehouses and looked into his background a bit. But when Ginjima had met him, he did not have the mental capacity to talk straight, whether he'd been that way from the beginning or if it was the result of experiencing such pain and fear.

There was the possibility that he was one of the Marubatsu-gumi's men, but what came to mind was the demonic serial killer that had been stirring up the town lately. He fit the criterion of carrying an axe, and more importantly, if he was a hitman, there would be no sense in him hiding underneath the bed.

But if he really was the serial killer – on top of doing as he pleased on their turf, he'd gone so far as to lift a hand against one of their group. In any case, they couldn't just let him go or hand him over to the police.

To begin with, when Ginjima had arrived, Shibazato and the others had inflicted unreasonable “restraints” on him, far beyond simple self-defense. If they'd handed him over to the police, it wouldn't have been clear who the wrong-doer was. It would've been a different story if they'd had concrete evidence that the man was a serial killer.

In any case, they took Ginjima's stance: "...The leader hasn't got much time left, so I wanna keep this bloody matter away from him." They kept him confined and took a wait-and-see approach for the time being, but to think he still had the strength to escape. Gangrene was setting into his legs; they'd thought he wouldn't even be able to walk.

'This's turned into a huge pain in the ass.'

As he pondered over their current situation, Ginjima regretted not putting an end to the axe man immediately. He had hesitated to outright kill him not just because of their leader, but also because he was trying to go straight and selfishly didn't want to dirty his own hands.

Every time he wanted to kill, the face of a certain girl came to mind.

It was not the face of his fiancée, the daughter of their leader. She had long ago stepped into this world and was prepared to kill or be killed.

Rather, the one he thought of was the girl for whom he had decided to go straight. The one who had fallen from the sky and called herself a "magical girl" – it was the face of the glasses-wearing girl who was now his daughter.

"...Ah, damn. So in the end it turned out like this, huh..."

It wasn't only that he'd been set loose. In the end, it was possible that his daughter would be exposed to danger. She'd gone over to play at a friend's house; worried, he'd given them a call, and that friend's parent would drive her back to the mansion.

In any case, relieved that his daughter was safe, Ginjima mulled over the current situation.

Upon learning that gunshots had been heard, some of the gang members had hastened to the warehouse, only to find it already surrounded by police, with countless men being taken away by ambulance.

Long ago, it would've been trouble had the police investigated that warehouse, but now that the group's finances were in decline, all of those things should have been disposed of.

But it would be slightly troublesome if the police discovered the bloodstains in that hidden room. They used to get in a lot of trouble like this, but with their current lack of power, hushing it up would be a pain. For now, the man who was acting as that warehouse's temporary owner told the police, "The warehouse hasn't been used much recently, but it seems like some suspicious guys move in and out of it at night."

In truth, it was no secret that that warehouse was under the control of the Amida-gumi, but it was also true that they hadn't used it recently. They'd even thought about renting it out to pull in a bit more money.

'Who's been there lately who wasn't guarding or torturing or looking after the axe man... Oh, maybe when we tossed in those land of magic guys' staffs?'

That day, after he'd cut through all the staffs and driven the enemy away, they were unsure whether to burn or throw away those tools from the "land of magic", so for now, they'd tossed them in the warehouse.

But the police weren't fools either. It would be impossible to pin everything on imaginary delinquents trespassing in the warehouse.

The phone in his pocket rang as he thought up ways to dodge the question of the hidden room.

"Hey, Boss."

The voice coming through the phone was that of a young group member. It sounded like the skinhead.

"Masa? What is it?"

"From what I hear, when the police got here, there were five people of unknown ethnicity leaving the warehouse who panicked and ran off. Apparently they didn't look Japanese at all..."

"...Five people? And foreigners... There's a lot of kinds, you know, like Arabs and Chinese."

"Uhh, but it seems like they were Caucasians. But their hair and eye color and stuff were weird."

A certain group surfaced in Ginjima's mind at Masa's words. To confirm it, he turned toward the receiver, and wearing a serious expression, he uttered a single order.

"The crime scene investigators with the police... Get them to check if the jute bag on the very last shelf on the left side is gone."

"Looks like it'll be hard to work with them... We'll manage somehow. So what's in the bag?"

"...Staffs like Summer's 'Piriolim'. ...Well, if the cops ask, just tell 'em they're toys Sis really loved as a kid."

With that said, he hung up and waited impatiently for the reports of the group members scattered across the city to search for the axe man.

However, he didn't have long to wait. The moment he placed the phone on the desk, the ringtone went off.

It was a different person: the phone number was that of the crew cut man, one of their high-ranking members.

When he pushed the "call" button and heard the other man's tense voice, Ginjima braced himself and listened closely to what he had to say.

"This is Shibazato."

"What is it?"

"...Right now I'm in one of the back alleys near the cemetery... I heard a weird scream, so I got excited and rushed in... and found them."

"That axe bastard!?"

Ginjima was prepared to hear some good news, but the answer he received could not have been any worse.

"No, there's no one here but the victims."

"What...? Victims?"

"A kid and a salaryman. The kid's a girl, and... how do I say it. I dunno if they were meeting secretly in this alley or something, but the guy's face is beaten to a pulp. He's dead. The girl's shoulder's cut open... but it doesn't look very deep."

Dead.

Upon hearing those words, Ginjima's grip tightened on the phone.

He deduced that innocent people had become casualties, but even so, Ginjima kept his mouth shut and did not lose his cool. It was not just because his moral compass was not that strong, but also that he realized with a growing sense of guilt that the situation was only getting worse.

Ginjima kept listening to his subordinate's report to confirm the details, and Shibazato continued in an even tenser voice.

"...There was another kid, a boy, but he... he went chasing after the axe man and disappeared."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"No... I don't really get it, but when we reached the alley where we heard the scream, that axe bastard and the kid were fighting... When I ran up, the axe bastard ran away really damn fast... He was so fast I couldn't believe he was even human. But I was sure I mangled the tendons in his legs..."

Shibazato spoke without even trying to hide his frustration, but soon enough his tone reverted and he resumed speaking.

"So when that kid saw me, he yelled, 'Please, call an ambulance for her...!' and went chasing off after the axe bastard. 'Course, two other guys with me went after him, but... putting aside the brat, dunno if they can catch up with the axe bastard... We've got one other guy still here."

"...I see. Got it... Call an ambulance from a pay phone. Don't use your cell. It's the worst possible timing for them to find out the Amida-gumi were first on the scene..."

"Was there a pay phone around here?"

"If there isn't, drive them to a hospital and get lost before anyone notices you."

He stopped just short of saying “leave them there”, but that was Ginjima’s... or rather, the group’s kindness showing through. On the one hand, Shibazato felt disgusted; this was why their group was in decline. But he remembered his much younger sister, smiled brightly, and responded with just a single word: “Yes.”

Ginjima thought as he hung up the phone. What in the world was happening around them?

To begin with, the axe man shouldn’t even have been able to move. And yet his movements were now better than before, to the point that he could be called “superhuman”.

What was this all about? To begin with, who had set the axe man free? They’d said a number of youngsters were taken away by ambulance, but why had they been by the warehouse so late at night?

As all the information swirled about in his mind, Ginjima worried over the group of men and women who had seemed to be foreigners. If they really were the people from the land of magic from before, then it was possible that Summer would also become involved in this incident.

His fists clenched tighter and tighter as he recalled the face of his absent daughter.

And within his solid fists, stronger than anyone’s, he felt his own powerlessness.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

Just before she woke up from the pain of her wound, Maya had a dream.

What she had seen just before she lost consciousness became a dream and repeated within her mind.

After she had been cut by the axe-wielding demon and pain ran through her whole body – a human figure had leapt at the demon who had cut her.

That figure’s yell reached her ears. “Maya.” It had called her name.

She knew that the voice was unmistakably Shouma’s.

It was the same voice as the demon that had assumed Shouma's name and form. However, she felt that this was truly Shouma's voice.

It was because Shouma had been fighting. He had been fighting desperately with a discarded pole against a larger opponent, one wielding an axe many, many times more lethal than her own holy sword.

It actually wasn't discarded, but an iron pipe he had prepared, but the truth had been distorted in her dream and was recorded in her memories as reality. Most of it was faithful to reality, which only engraved that lie even deeper upon her heart.

'Oh. It's the same.'

'It's the same as when I was attacked by that dog. Shouma... Shouma saved me.'

'Shouma really is... my hero.'

The moment she thought that, her faded consciousness was brought back to reality by the pain running through her whole body. For a while she didn't know what had happened, but she seemed to be sitting in some sort of seat, still gripping the knife in her hand. Her eyes picked up the interior of a car she'd never seen before.

...No, to be more precise, Maya remembered. She had been brought to this car before she completely lost consciousness. When she looked outside, she found they were on the premises of a mansion somewhere. When she noticed that, she began to recall exactly what had happened in her dream and in reality.

'After I was cut, they took me to this car...'

Just when her consciousness returned, she heard the voices of two men having a conversation outside.

"Hey, wait, Shibazato. What were you thinking, bringing her here? Huh?"

"Nothing we could do about it, Boss. The bitch held a knife to her own neck, was going on and on about the hospital and the police being full of enemies... She was yelling that she'd rather kill herself than get killed by the demon at the hospital, so we didn't really..."

"That's right. I was hurt and the man with the crew cut came and saved me... But he was saying he'd take me to the hospital... No, no. The hospital and the police have already fallen under the influence of Letmuj's monsters. So I absolutely can't go there."

It seemed she had displayed a deep suspicion of the medical and public facilities. Of course, if the police had known she was from Hikarijima, things would take a completely different turn and she would be relentlessly questioned. It would be the same at the hospital. On top of that, she could well imagine what would happen if she told them, "I must swiftly dispatch of Letmuj's demons on the Great God Nambaja's orders."

Now that she had completely returned to her senses, she noticed something unsettling by her feet. She remembered that the floor of the car had seemed abnormally high, and when she looked down, she found the body of a man kneeling by her feet.

"Ahh..."

At the sight of the lifeless hunk of flesh, she started to scream, but she immediately remembered that it was her own fault he had been taken along.

At the same time, she could hear the argument continuing from right beside the car. Rather than calling it an argument, it seemed more like a reprimand and a lot of excuses in reply.

"...Even if she made you do it, why'd you have to bring the corpse along!? The police will be here soon, you know!?"

"That's what I thought too! But that bitch was saying things like 'He might still be alive' and 'We can't just abandon one of Letmuj's holy warriors...'"

"Huh? What's a holy warrior..."

"No, well, I thought it was stupid too... but then I remembered Nacchan."

The crewcut man was making awkward excuses to the dreadful man with the long scar running across his face. However, the moment the crewcut man uttered the word "Nacchan," the dreadfulness of that scarred face relaxed for an instant.

As she wondered why that was, Maya concentrated on the collapsed body at her feet. Right, even if he was dead, it was possible that his soul would return and grant him life through the divine grace of the Great God Nambaja.

The inconvenient god continued to transmit their voice into her mind. And yet, with not a shred of spite toward that god, only faith, she decided to pray for the resurrection of the man before her.

But the moment she looked at the man's body again, preparing to offer up a prayer-

"Anyway, the problem is how we get rid of it now. Let's take the knife from the kid and get her to the hospital—"

"No... noooooo!"

At about the same time as Ginjima regained his composure and muttered, a scream came from within the car.

Wondering what had happened, they opened the back door of the car – and there was the girl, looking down with her hand covering her mouth, shaking.

Was she screaming at the body? That was what Ginjima thought for a moment, but when he looked at the corpse, he realized that didn't seem to be the case.

A clear change was coming over the body, which shouldn't have been moving at all.

"...What?"

The corpse crammed between the seats looked unnaturally dark. No, to be more specific, the clothes were the same, but it looked like some sort of shadow was dyeing the exposed skin.

Even as Ginjima watched, the shadow swiftly spread across the man's skin–

In the next instant, it was as if a faint particle of light had shot into the air. The body, swallowed by shadows and completely smooth, was unable to bear its own weight and crumbled. To Ginjima, it was as if the man's body was smashed into small pieces: the dancing particles scattered and disappeared like fireworks, dissolving into the air.

Left behind were only the clothes, shoes, and wristwatch the man had been wearing. The silver lump rolling near where his head had been was most likely a tooth filling.

Most unsettling was that the blood plastered thick across his clothes, the proof that he had existed, had completely vanished.

“...What happened?”

Ginjima murmured as if to himself and knitted his eyebrows, but the girl sitting in the back seat seemed to be in shock.

“What... happened? Is this... also part of Letmuj’s magic!?”

The girl trembled violently as she muttered such strange words. She was probably around sixteen years old.

Ginjima hesitated, unsure whether he should speak to her – but with perfect timing, the cell phone in his pocket rang.

He considered ignoring it, but he decided the matter of the axe man was more important right now, and he walked a little ways away from the car and pushed the call button.

“This is bad, Boss.”

“...? What is it?”

The voice he heard through the phone receiver was that of the skinhead, Masa. Ginjima thought it would be information about the jute bag, but his voice was laced with unusually strong anxiety.

“The axe bastard cut down some pretty young guys, right?”

“Yeah... did they die?”

If someone died, the situation would become even more serious; Ginjima guessed that was what Masa was referring to when he said it was “bad”. But the “badness” of which Masa spoke was completely different from what Ginjima imagined.

"Seems like they were guys from the Marubatsu-gumi."

"...!"

At that moment, he felt a sharp pain from the stab wound in his back and the gunshot wound in his stomach.

As Ginjima digested those words, he gave several orders and hung up the phone.

"...This's gotten dangerous."

He didn't know why people from the Marubatsu-gumi had been hanging around that warehouse. It wasn't particularly special, and if they were planning to put down wiretaps or commit arson, or even go so far as to plant bombs, that warehouse was not at all worth it.

But that no longer mattered.

That the "thing" inside the Amida-gumi's warehouse had injured members of the Marubatsu-gumi was an **unshakeable** truth.

Ginjima had been injured, and combined with the mysterious gas explosion had occurred at the Marubatsu-gumi's office, their dispute had turned into a ceasefire. But their hostility hadn't waned; rather, it was more like they were looking for an opportunity—

This incident would definitely become the spark that started the conflict. Even if the opportunity was created by the axe man, who had no connection to the Amida-gumi. For the Marubatsu-gumi, a collection of youths closer to a gang than yakuza, something like this was enough to declare revenge.

If they did, he would undoubtedly become their first target. The hitmen who had failed to kill him before might come after him again to regain their honor.

Ginjima's eyes narrowed as he imagined those around him getting caught up in it. The Apparition was not in the least afraid of those after his own life, but when he thought about the possibility of his fiancée and daughter getting involved, a chill ran down his spine.

Several minutes later, the sound of a car engine met Ginjima's ears as he pondered on what he should do.

Was it a patrol car or an attack by the Marubatsu-gumi?

But there was no way the Marubatsu-gumi were that reckless. It was too early for the police to be here, and a little while ago he'd gotten a call from a detective they knew—

As he thought about such things, a single RV stopped before the gate that created a gap in the tall fence.

Just when Ginjima thought the car looked familiar—

"Ginjima-san! I'm back!"

The moment Ginjima heard that unendingly bright voice, a girl jumped out in front of him. There was a long, thin bag slung across her back, like the kind a baseball player might keep a bat in, and the face behind her glasses was smiling innocently.

"Summer..."

Even though he was in such a state that he couldn't honestly be happy, Ginjima greeted the girl – Summer Ginjima – with a relieved expression.

When Ginjima glanced toward the car, a man had gotten out from the driver's seat and was unloading Summer's bicycle from the back of the car.

On the man's shoulder rode a doll-like praying mantis about the size of a puppy, murmuring thanks as he hung his head obsequiously.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry. You came all the way here to drop us off! But that Summer-chan isn't even helping you with her bike. Honestly!"

"Hahaha, I don't mind at all. I was the one who put it in, too."

The man chatted casually with a creature that was clearly not of this world. When Ginjima saw him, he took Summer's hand and walked forward with a serious expression.

"Ah... Master Hariyama."

At Ginjima's surprisingly meek words, the man leisurely turned around.

"Hey, Ginjima-san. Sorry we're late..."

The glasses-wearing man had the kind of face that no one would hate or even resent. Logically, that made it an inoffensive face, features without the slightest hint of disagreeableness.

Even when he looked at Ginjima, who had a frightening face befitting one who did not live an honest life, there was not a shred of fear or timidity on his own face, which bore no notable features besides the glasses.

Ginjima owed his life to this man, and he was also the father of one of Summer's classmates after she began attending school last week. That being said, Ginjima was still trying to avoid contact with upstanding people, and though he couldn't forget his debt, this was not a man he went out of his way to interact with.

However – Ginjima bowed his head deeply to this man.

He was about to force an honest man to get involved in their world. No, it wasn't just because he would become involved. It was a bow of apology for fearing that he would become involved and still forcing his selfishness as a parent onto him.

Hariyama-san stared blankly at him, surprised at suddenly being bowed to, and Ginjima began speaking in a way he would normally never let anyone else hear.

"...I know it's impudent for a yakuza like me to ask something of an honest man like you... But, but, Hariyama-san, will you please do me a favor?"

"What is it?"

Hariyama-san's expression grew a little more serious at the other's unusual behavior. Ginjima gave Summer, who was standing next to him, a push on the back in his direction.

"...It doesn't matter how many days. Will you... please look after Summer for me?"

"Huh? What? What?"

Summer's eyes went wide at this sudden development. When she saw Ginjima's solemn expression, she smiled brightly, as if she'd cheered up. "Is this about that 'pervert' you were on the phone about? It's okay! I can use magic and Tis is always with me!"

"But I'm an arthropod only about as big as a puppy and I don't even have any venom. You shouldn't expect too much from me." The large praying mantis clearly objected as he flew from Hariyama-san's shoulder to atop Summer's head.

Ginjima shook his head, smiling slightly at the girl and the bug. "Nah, to be honest, the police might be coming here soon to check things out... Hey, look, you got into school by forging your papers with magic... but you don't have any official records yet, right?"

"Ehhh!? Ginjima-san, did they catch us!?"

"That's not it. Don't worry about it."

After that, Ginjima convinced Summer without saying a word about the Marubatsu-gumi. The other person concerned, Hariyama-san, was putting the already-unloaded bicycle back into the car.

"...Sorry. I'm in your debt. I'll do something about the food expenses later..."

"No, no, don't worry about it. Summer used to live with us, after all."

"...Even though she blew up your house after half a day."

"Ahaha." As Hariyama-san laughed at Tis's retort, he opened the door to the passenger's seat, where Summer would ride.

But then Hariyama-san's eyes fell on the car stopped a short distance away.

"...Ginjima-san, who's that girl?"

"...?"

Ginjima turned around and witnessed the girl trying to climb out of the group's car, while Shibazato tried with all his might to push her back in.

“...Well, she got caught up in one of our fights and we brought her here. For some reason she kicked up a fuss, saying not to bring her to the hospital...”

Upon seeing the girl involved in the dispute, Summer wore a troubled expression, seemingly lost in thought – and then she suddenly turned to Ginjima and raised her voice.

“Ginjima-san! I’ll take her with me! See, I might be able to heal her a little!”

“Silly, what’re you talking about?”

“I’ve been learning healing magic, you know!? I still can’t cure sicknesses or do anything too hard... But if it’s a wound, I can heal it a bit!”

She had nearly lost Ginjima before because she hadn’t studied healing magic, and so she had begun to learn the basics by watching the land of magic’s classes through a homemade compact mirror. The construction of scrying magic required unusually complex techniques; on top of that, scrying through the barrier between worlds was something that could only be done by high-level mages in the land of magic. Though that posed no trouble to Summer, she was a complete amateur in healing and health-restoring magicks.

Until just a few weeks ago, that is.

Thanks to Summer, who had gained knowledge and techniques at a startling rate, the wounds in Ginjima’s back and stomach healed with unbelievable speed.

However, Ginjima was not the type of man who believed everything could be solved with magic.

“That’s not the issue. Don’t drag Master Hariyama any further into—”

“Don’t mind me!”

Ginjima let out a deep sigh at Hariyama-san, who had responded with a bright smile. Summer had probably thought Hariyama-san would say that and so spoken in a louder voice than necessary.

She was still just a kid but she was already plotting like that. Ginjima tried to glare subtly at her, but he realized her eyes were more serious than usual and could not bring himself to say anything more.

On the other hand, the situation had reached a head; the girl pulled out a fruit knife at Shibazato.

“P-Please go away! Sorry, but I... I have to go!”

“Hey now... what’re you gonna do with that toy? A civilian shouldn’t be waving around a blade like that.”

Shibazato let out a tired sigh at the girl, who looked to be a little younger than his sister.

Seeing Ginjima approach behind him, the girl spoke, wearing a desperate expression. “Please stop! I can’t go to the hospital or the police... They’re already being controlled!”

Without flinching at her strange behavior or the blade of her knife, Ginjima drew closer to the tense girl – and extended his right hand in a momentary opening.

“I got it. Let’s just get this away from you for now.”

“Huh...?”

The next thing she knew, the knife had already disappeared from her hand.

She remembered feeling a light shock, but at that point, Ginjima was already holding the knife.

“Kids shouldn’t be playing with blades.”

He remembered saying something similar before. Ginjima took the dumbfounded girl by the arm and pulled her toward Hariyama-san’s car.

“Sorry. Take this girl to the hospital if it looks like she’s in danger. We’ll definitely find some way to thank you for this...!”

Ginjima bowed his head deeply, but Hariyama-san spoke of his own desires in a small voice.

"Thanks, huh... Then will you let our son take Summer-chan as his bride?"

"That's a bit... I can't sell off my daughter to pay her parent's debt."

"Haha, I'm just kidding."

It was the kind of joke that could make someone extremely uncomfortable, but Hariyama-san's gentle expression and behavior completely negated that possibility.

Seeing their exchange and possibly judging that this Hariyama-san was not dangerous, the girl whose knife had been stolen reluctantly got in the car.

Summer closed the passenger's side door and moved to get into the back seat with the girl. The praying mantis riding her head asked her a question.

"...Hey. You were looking at that girl really seriously... What's up?"

"Mm. Well, she... She kind of has a mysterious feel to her..."

Summer answered haltingly, perhaps because she hadn't yet put her own thoughts in order.

"It's sort of like people from the land of magic, and sort of not... Umm, it's different from this planet's people... I feel a power like my own!"

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

And so – perhaps to escape from the police – they headed towards Hariyama-san's home.

However, Hariyama-san hadn't realized. Neither had Summer, or Maya, or even Tis, who was attuned to danger.

That they were being tailed by a single motorbike a safe distance away.

Or that the driver was having a disturbing conversation with someone through the wireless communicator built into his helmet.

"Got it – we'll go after 'em too. Keep a close eye on them. We'll sink you in Tamako Lake if you take your eyes off 'em."

The young man with the red knit cap spun his pistol gleefully as he communicated with the bike that tailed the RV. He was toying with the lethal weapon with no regard for whether or not the safety was on, like a careless amateur.

Beside him, the boy with the blue knit cap was looking at the blade of his knife with a languid expression. It was difficult to tell if he was gazing at its sharp gleam or at his own reflection in the blade.

The group led by the strange duo had lost several people at the warehouse a little while ago – but now, a group several times that size was gathering elsewhere.



The gang of strange youths was split up into several vans and was moving on the orders of the two wearing knit caps.

Ginjima, the bitter enemy of the Amida-gumi.

It was all to snare the “bait” they would use to lure him – just that.

“But Bro. Is that kid really Ginjima’s daughter?”

“Yeah, well. Doesn’t matter. All that’s important is that he cares about her...”

As the red knit cap smiled and muttered, he remembered what had happened several weeks ago.

In that moment, when he had pointed his gun with its silencer, the glasses-wearing girl had stood in front of his target – but in an extremely strange turn of events, his target had moved around the girl again and shielded her instead.

“...Though we didn’t think he’d live... But we can look on the bright side. There’s a chance we can have a lot more fun.”

“Yeah, maybe. But there’s also the darker side: there’s a chance we might get the tables turned on us. Ginjima got revenge on all the Marubatsu-gumi guys even when he was hospitalized, remember? Dunno if we can win even with this many people...”

“Just the bright side is fine. Hey, go back to school and make a bright side club or something.” [1]

Completely ignoring his follower’s warning, the red knit cap stowed the revolver in his pocket and gave the driver’s seat a kick from where he sat in the back of the van.

“Hey, get going.”

“...”

The subordinate wordlessly started the vehicle and the van slowly set off into the night.

Before the van began shaking, the blue knit cap folded his knife and repeated himself. “Can we beat him if we take him head-on? ... Look, I thought I stabbed him in the

vitals. But he's perfectly fine now, somehow. I kinda feel like we can't win if we take him head-on."

"Ah, dammit, just shut your fucking trap already."

Though his words showed clear irritation, the blue knit cap spoke with the same unchanging smile.

"That's why we're gonna do this head-on, fair and square – by grabbing that kid."

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

After Hariyama-san had proceeded about 100 meters from the Amida residence, their RV passed by several patrol cars.

The vehicles were most likely headed to the Amida-gumi, but they made no move to stop the RV, which was clearly not one of the group's cars, and they silently continued along the night road without turning on the sirens.

As he scoped out the situation, the praying mantis in the front seat called out to his partner in the back.

"We just missed them... Geez, Summer-chan, if you get caught by the police, you're just going to blow up the jail with a bomb **again!**"

"Ooh... I already feel bad for what I did back then..."

Summer sat in *seiza* in the back seat as she hung her head, looking dejected. She drew the flower-patterned "magic wand Piriolim (according to Summer)" from the bat case on her back.

"...!"

Her expression immediately tightened and a pale light ran across the surface of the staff from where she gripped it. The lines of light that reached the tip of the staff each wriggled like the vines of a plant and stretched out toward the injured girl.

For a moment, the girl, Maya Isojima, was taken aback at the sight, but she did not sense any hostility from the waves of light that reached out to her. She closed her eyes quietly and allowed all of it to flow into her.

Rather, to her, the light felt something like the voice of the god that spoke to her... Or, perhaps, it felt like something nostalgic she knew from long ago...

The gentle power touched the mouth of her wound. At that moment, the pain began to disappear from her body.

“...!”

While she was still surprised, the wound was quickly beginning to close, and the heat and sensations that had disappeared began to spread throughout her body once again.

“What... is...”

‘Could this girl be another one of the holy warriors!?’

Maya considered that, but the god’s voice didn’t tell her anything. Instead it only repeated the mission it had entrusted to her, just as it always had.

And while she was checking the god’s voice, Maya realized that the pain had completely disappeared from her body.

“My wound...?”

There was a bit of a scar, but the pain and the blood flow had stopped. Seeing this, Maya asked the girl in front of her with a mystified expression, “You... who are you...?”

“Ehehe... the magical girl of love and courage and hope and desires, hailing from Saitama, the land of color and so on, the psychic Summer-chan!”

At Summer’s confident introduction, an exasperated voice came from the front seat.

“It’s different from before, it’s long, it’s uncool, it doesn’t flow well, I don’t know where you’re getting this ‘psychic’ stuff from, and to begin with, the ‘Saitama, the land of color’ before the ‘so on’ doesn’t even have anything to do with your name.”

“...Then Summer-chan of the summer of Tokorozawa?”

"No no no, that's wrong in all sorts of ways! And there are too many 'ofs' there! And you keep adding 'chan' to it and that makes it even longer than the place!"

"Then, the girl from super awesome Tokorozawa..."

"Why are you making the place longer!?"

As she listened to the praying mantis continue to make reasonable objections – Maya's whole body gave a start and her eyes widened.

"The toy praying mantis... talks?"

"How rude! I'm not a toy! I'm Tis! I'm an ultra rare critically endangered species, probably the only one on Earth! The Washington Convention would be really surprised to see me!"

Hariyama-san continued to smile brightly, even as he thought that they would be more likely to impose strict restraints on him.

Maya looked at the reflection of the driver in the mirror and fell quiet again – and then raised her voice entreatingly.

"P... please stop!"

"All right, all right."

Hariyama-san answered readily, pulling over to the shoulder of the road and switching on his hazard lights. The car's side lamps turned on at the same time, preparing to stop safely, and the vehicle gradually decelerated.

Maya hadn't expected him to agree so easily, and she returned her bewildered gaze to the face reflected in the mirror. He only continued to smile as sweetly as ever, but he suddenly addressed Maya.

"I don't mind if you get off, but what do you plan to do?"

"I... I must defeat Letmuj's demons as soon as possible in order to save this world!"

"Huh?"

"I came from the Ancient Millennium Continent and the great god Nambaja bestowed power upon me. And–"

She looked confused, but she was still able to say that much without hesitation. It was because she had repeated those words countless times before, and the god's voice resounding in her mind supported her.

Maya continued speaking for over two minutes. Even so, she still hadn't said enough about her mission, but she ran out of breath and stopped talking for a moment. That was how enthusiastically and fervently she spoke.

However – the first answer she received was a straightforward response from the praying mantis.

"Ack!? I thought you were a pretty calm girl, but you're just like Summer-chan!?"

"Eh... the same... S-So you really are one of Nambaja's too!?"

At their slightly out-of-sync conversations, Summer stared blankly at the faces of the person and the animal.

"If you're one of the warriors too, help me defeat that demon...!"

Maya tried to open the door as she spoke, but the door suddenly locked.

The car had been stopping, but now it sped up, and at some point, the hazard light had turned off.

"W-What...?"

She asked Hariyama-san cautiously, and he answered, his expression the same as always, "Well, you know, it just worried me a bit."

As he allowed the car to travel slightly below the speed limit, Hariyama-san asked a question of the girl whose name they still did not know.

"That injury... Did you perhaps get it from that Let-something's demon?"

Maya cast her eyes down and sat in silence for a while, which Hariyama-san took as affirmation.

After several moments of silence, the driver spoke again, his voice unchanged.

“...I’d like to hear a bit more of your story before you leave the car.”

“...There’s no time...!”

“Do you have a plan?”

“Huh...?”

Maya raised her head automatically and realized that, at some point, the driver’s smile had become serious. It wasn’t a thoughtless smile, but the kind of smile used to comfort someone.

“The same thing will happen again if you just rush in... If you’re not careful, you might die this time. He should have defeated you before, but you stand in his way again. ...If he really is a demon, shouldn’t you carefully plan out how to finish him off?”

“That’s...”

“So don’t you think it’s better to come up with a plan before you go? I’m just a humble designer; I don’t have a grand goal like you, or magic powers like Summer-chan, or strength like Ginjima-san. The most I can do is talk to you. But... I might be able to help you out, give you some ideas, by talking, and there’s a chance you could convince Summer-chan to lend you her magic powers.”

Maya’s breath caught involuntarily at Hariyama-san’s words, the words of a normal person.

Now that she thought about it, she’d talked about this countless times before, but this was the first time someone had responded to her seriously.

‘No. I can’t get my hopes up.’

She had received insincere replies countless times up till now. Everyone had pretended to listen to her seriously, but then she’d realized they were trying to take her to the hospital or the police. But when she remembered they were commoners who could not hear the great god Nambaja’s voice, she couldn’t help but feel that it was only natural.

'Even so, being betrayed... hurts.'

"You're saying that, but... you don't really believe me, do you? If you're just going along with my story, I'll—"

"Hmmm. Well, there is a part of me that doesn't really care either way. But to tell the truth, I don't think it's that weird."

The driver of unknown age slowly began to tell Maya about himself.

"...A long time ago, an acquaintance of mine got abducted by aliens right in front of me. ...And after that, he suddenly returned and started bragging that he'd saved the world. And then... a world-famous phantom thief came to steal from me, and a very cute girl fell from the sky into my room."

At the last part, Summer averted her eyes, looking embarrassed. Without noticing the behavior of the girl beside her, Maya opened her mouth, a bit petulant. "Are you messing with me?"

"So you don't believe me... Yeah, well, hm. It makes things a bit difficult if we can't even talk to each other properly."

Maya looked at the driver's face in the mirror as he laughed a bit sadly and was assailed by unavoidable feelings of guilt.

At some point, their positions had been reversed. Even though she felt he had dodged her question, she began to speak of her plan in order to change the topic.

"...Shouma..."

"Huh?"

"Before... my childhood friend, Shouma, came to save me. So Shouma should be in this city too. ...Huh? But in the beginning, the demon took his form... But the evil aura... Huh? ...What? I'm sorry, it looks like I'm a bit confused."

When she had been saved from the axe-wielding demon, where had the evil aura been coming from?

She couldn't remember it clearly. In her dream, Shouma had definitely been her hero. But – in reality, had she been able to feel an aura from the axe-wielding man?

'Back then, there was a really loud noise... The aura... came from... next to him?'

She was remembering something she shouldn't have. No. She mustn't remember.

But in the next moment, the god's voice began to echo in her mind once again. Destroy the enemy. Fill the world with light. Just as if it was telling her not to stray, no matter what the reality was.

And just when the god's voice was about to become noise again–

"Shouma..."

The voice of the normal person immediately restored her thoughts to normal.

"...Shouma Zakojima-kun?"

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

Tokorozawa, a certain parking lot

Some distance away from the cemetery was a parking lot for a large superstore.

In a corner, leaning against the fence separating a grove of trees from the parking lot, the mysterious man holding an axe took a deep breath.

In his head, which no longer contained any traces of sanity, he mulled over what had happened to his body.

As he was subjected to pain and pain and more pain, he experienced the fear he had inflicted upon others for the first time. He couldn't understand how he had found himself in that situation. And it no longer mattered.

Now what he felt was – an overwhelming sense of freedom!

His whole body was brimming with power. Perhaps it was compensation for the long suffering he had endured.

When he'd tried swinging his axe, those strong-looking men had fallen surprisingly easily before him.

Even hiding under the bed and massacring under the cover of darkness didn't compare to the pleasant sensation running through his whole body. To force their surrender with his overwhelming power. That was what had brought him pleasure thus far.

But even though his heart was satiated – his body still hungered.

He didn't have the first clue what had happened to his body. But at those young men's screams, his body had felt only hunger.

However, when he had cut the girl who gave off a mysterious feel, his hunger was satiated for just an instant. Hers was an existence like his own – the girl had an aura as if she was moving under a power different from that of humans. He did not understand the reason or the truth behind it, but his instincts understood disgustingly well.

She was not "prey" meant only to satisfy his own twisted desires–

She was "fodder" meant to satiate him, an existence that differed subtly from humans.

And so, the mysterious man began to walk.

One step, and then another, toward the scent of that premium fodder – gradually increasing his pace.

He had already abandoned his sense of reason, focusing on his instinctual hunger.

He could feel instinctively where his fodder was to be found. And that knowledge was accompanied by joy.

Very near his fodder – he could feel the presence of another fodder, several dozen times stronger.

Within Hariyama-san's RV

“...So, I just don’t... know anymore. Has Shouma... really... become a demon...”

First she had given her own name; then she had sighed and told the whole story, from everything that had happened today up to how she had gotten here. When Maya had just about finished explaining all that had happened, she sagged back into her seat, exhausted.

Hariyama-san kept his silence as he listened; Summer watched her excitedly. As for Tis, he curled up atop the passenger seat, his expression saying that he was glad they had chosen to listen.

She hadn’t expected any sympathy, so Maya did not feel uncomfortable at the silence within the car. However... there was just one thing Maya hadn’t told them.

She didn’t tell them what she had seen just a little while ago, at the yakuza mansion.

The demon... the corpse of the man who had been killed by the demon in Shouma’s form, inside the car... had disappeared under her feet, leaving behind not a single trace... that repulsive sight.

All humans feared that which they did not understand. Maya couldn’t understand the mystery of the corpse’s disappearance; she had tried asking Nambaja within her heart, but the god’s voice would say nothing on the matter.

No, that wasn’t all.

Today, ever since she had met the demon that had taken Shouma’s form – or perhaps the real Shouma – the god’s voice had failed to give her any concrete orders pertaining to her mission, other than to destroy the enemy. This was surely because there was nothing else she should do until she finished her mission.

As she tried to convince herself of that, Hariyama-san, who until now had been quiet, opened his mouth.

“Ahh... Umm, it’s a bit late, but I’ll introduce myself. I’m Hariyama. This girl is Summer-chan, and this praying mantis is Tis-kun.”

“Haa.”

Maya thought his words were rather far from the topic at hand, but she nodded obediently and committed their names to memory. As he looked at her reflection in the mirror, Hariyama-san continued to speak as he drove.

“So... what do you plan to do?”

“What to do...”

“If you meant Shouma-kun. You’re not just going to try to stab him without any explanation, are you?”

“I...”

Before, she had been worked up into a frenzy when he said he had killed her father.

But it was the same now. If his words had been truth, she was not sure she would be able to control herself.

“If... my father really was... No, if the real Shouma killed my father...”

“Whether it’s true or not, it can’t hurt to make sure of it first, right?”

“...”

“From what you said... He didn’t show any hostility toward you. Of course, he might have been trying to deceive you, Isojima-san. Or he might not have been. In other words, it’s impossible to know. If he really has become a demon, or if a demon has taken his form, why would he tell you about your father... If he was being controlled by a demon, it would have been easier for him if he pretended he held your father hostage.”

Gripping the steering wheel, Hariyama-san laid out his thoughts carefully. As she listened to his words, she felt herself calm down somewhat. She faced Hariyama-san as he continued to sort out his thoughts and asked directly about Shouma for the first time.

“Is it true... Does Shouma really live next door to you, Hariyama-san...?”

"Yeah. He's a polite, well-behaved boy. But he seems kind of lonely. On the day he arrived... he said something about having some kind of side job..."

As if considering her feelings, Hariyama-san answered most of her questions before she asked them.

"I see..."

It seemed Shouma had returned to living a normal life. If he had been in this town from before she arrived, there was no chance that her heart had been read and a demon had simply chosen to take Shouma's form.

Seeing the complicated expression Maya wore, Hariyama-san spoke in a gentle voice.

"Well, we'll reach my home in just a little while. You can take your time and think there—"

Hariyama-san stopped mid-sentence and quickly began to decelerate. Summer lost her balance and pitched forward, and Tis toppled from atop the passenger seat to the floor of the car.

However, Maya knew why Hariyama-san had applied the brakes.

'I can feel it. I can feel the presence of evil, a villain cloaked in Letmuj's darkness.'

She'd known it was approaching them, but—

'I didn't think it would ambush us in the middle of the road.'

There were few cars around. If he had been there for a long time, he would have been run over by another car, or there was a good chance he would have caused a commotion. In other words, just as she could sense his evil aura, he could also sense her presence.

The RV ground to a halt, and in front of it stood Shouma, holding an iron pipe.

Shouma stood in front of the car as if to force it to stop, but when he saw the face of the driver, he looked a little surprised. It seemed to be true that he lived next door to Hariyama-san.

Maya noticed this and put her hand on the handle of the car door.

“Wha... Isn’t it dangerous to get out in front of someone with an iron pipe!?”

Panicked, Tis tried to stop her, but Summer answered in her place.

“It’s all right, Tis.”

“What?”

“I’ll get out with her.”

“That’s going too far! Hey, just, wait, if he really is a demon, your magic might not work either, you know!? Then what will...”

Summer was happy at the praying mantis’s concern for her, but she answered proudly and with confidence.

“It’s all right! Because we’re under the protection of the great god Nambaja!”

The moment he heard those words, Tis remembered Summer’s unfortunate disposition and screamed.

“She’s been influenced—!?”

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

“That surprised me... I didn’t think you’d be in Hariyama-san’s car—”

The boy murmured gently as Maya and a girl with a large praying mantis on her head got out of the car. His gaze was clear and unclouded, and he watched Maya with a mix of emotions in his eyes.

He was prepared for “something”. Most likely it would be the loss of life. However, it was still unknown whether it would be his life or Maya’s that was stolen.

“...!? Huh, your wound... Oh, so the only thing that was cut was your clothes, right? So then the blood was just my imagination...”

He didn't know about Summer's magic, and he honestly thought he had misinterpreted what he had witnessed before.

“Good...”

His expression was so relieved he looked like he was about to cry. Shouma spoke quietly. “Who's that girl?”

He looked at Summer standing beside Maya, and the girl called out as she began to move.

“The summoner working for the great god Nambaja, Namu Namu Summer-chan... transform!”

Her body was wrapped in light just as she uttered those nonsensical words.

In the next instant, it was as if she immediately transformed. The normal children's clothes she had been wearing had changed completely; she was now clad in a pink costume resembling that of an anime character.

Shouma's eyes widened slightly at the miraculously quick clothing change and the mysterious flash of light.

“...From that yell, I thought you were someone from Hikarijima, but... What was that? How did you change clothes?”

Along with the mysterious spectacle, Shouma could also feel a certain aura from the girl. He wore an absentminded expression as he slowly asked the two in front of him, “It's true that I can feel an aura from you, but... of what? It's a bit different from other heroes... And that praying mantis on top of your head, is it real? Hey... what's going on, Maya?”

Faced with Shouma, who seemed to be otherwise occupied, Maya continued to keep her silence.

It wasn't that she was holding back her anger or searching for the right thing to say. The god's voice was running wild within her heart, and it was all she could do to keep it in check.

[Bring light bring light bring light bring light bring light bring light bringlight bringlight bringlight bringlightbringlightlightlightlightlight]

The noise ate into her mind, trying to change her feelings for Shouma into murderous intent. It was not trying to move her heart with clever words. The raging voice pounded at her relentlessly and overwhelmingly, as if first trying to destroy her heart.

"Shouma..."

She squeezed the word out somehow, and with that beginning, she concentrated on listening to Shouma's voice.

It was not necessarily a rebellion against her mission as a hero. It was just – she wanted to know the truth. She just wanted to prepare herself. ...Prepare to work for her god, or perhaps–

"Ahh... I really am glad you're okay, Maya... So this time, please, finish..."

She heard Shouma's voice. The god's voice echoed even more intensely within her, urging her to erase his voice.

But she would not lose.

"Tell me... the truth..."

"Huh...?"

"What happened on Hikarijima!? What happened to you, Shouma!? Why... Why did you kill Dad... What happened to Mom!? Please, if you don't tell me... I can't kill you or be killed by you, Shouma...!"

Shouma fell silent and averted his gaze as she pled, tears streaming down her face. Seeing that, Maya begged him again.

"Tell me... It's not fair if you're the only one who's prepared... Let me be prepared too...! For me to kill you... Or for me to be killed by you... Let me prepare myself... If you want to know my answer, ask me the question!"

Shouma fell into even deeper silence in response to her yell, but—

"Maya... is the island's curse on you weakening?"

"Huh...?"

"For you to ask me something like that... to try to talk to me... that was inconceivable for any of the other heroes. Maybe its influence is weakening because of the strange power of the girl next to you... No, I'd be really happy if it was because of your love for me," he murmured self-deprecatingly, and quietly dropped the iron pipe.

Clang. The dry, metallic sound echoed, and at the same time, his eyes misted over with tears.

"Will you hear me out... and believe me? Maya..."

And so, the boy told them everything.

The truth of Hikarijima, which only he knew.

The terrifying things that had happened on the island that day, and how... Maya's father had died.

Everything, everything, without sparing a single detail.

"That... can't be..."

After she had heard all he had to say, she slowly sank to her knees on the shoulder of the road.

The voice echoing within her heart was all a twisted delusion caused by the island. And their ancestors – no, even their own bodies – were but parts of the grotesque body called Hikarijima.

And – she could not accept that Shouma had killed people, no matter what his reasons. Or that her father and mother were dead...

“You’re lying... For you to have killed the islanders in this town... Because, even if you did kill that many of them... Where did you hide the bodies? If you just killed, and killed, and killed... R-Right, there’s also... If a lot of people died on Hikarijima, where did their bodies go!? On the news they said there wasn’t even a single drop of blood left on the island...”

It was a fundamental question.

Even if a corpse had become impossible to identify, in present-day Japan, there was no way a slasher who killed people one after another could roam free without being caught. To begin with, he would have a hard time just finding a place to hide the bodies, and she didn’t think he had a way to transport them there.

But Maya already had some idea of the answer.

However, it was not something she could readily admit.

‘The body before... If he was also someone from Hikarijima...’

The children of the sacrifices, born as parts of the island, its hands and feet.

If they all awakened as “heroes” but died and did not fulfill their purpose... As far as the island was concerned, it was a waste to continue to expend power to hold together the form of a corpse.

Maya realized that her line of reasoning was correct, even as she became sickened at her own thoughts.

“And that’s why... That’s why, Maya.”

As if to deal the final blow, Shouma spread his arms wide and said something that she found utterly unbelievable.

“Please... kill me.”

“Huh?”

For a moment, the air around her grew colder at those sudden words from her beloved.

“What? What’re you talking about, Shouma?”

“If you kill me, everything will end for sure. You’ll – you’ll go back to normal, Maya. You’ll be the hero who killed me, the demon. The island will bestow its blessing on you too.”

“That’s... But that’s...”

If she was her normal self... If she was the person she had been before she had awoken as a hero, she would have yelled at Shouma for being an idiot and slapped him across the face. But her heart was torn between the “god’s voice” and the “truth” of which Shouma spoke, and those words stabbed deep into her heart like knives.

But in the next instant, Shouma withdrew a real knife from the pocket of his pants.

Maya tensed up, not a trace of the holy warrior’s heart left inside her, as he faced her and **held the knife to his own throat**.

Not long ago Maya had done the same thing when faced with a member of the Amida-gumi, but her breath caught at the sight and she thought her heart would stop.

The difference was that Ginjima was not there. There was no one present who could steal away the knife. Summer might have been able to do something with her magic, but Maya only knew of her ability to heal.

Maya froze. Shouma’s eyes as he looked at her were filled with sadness, apology, and... tenderness.

“Ah... I’d hoped you were going to be fanatical about this. If you won’t kill me, Maya... I’ll end it all myself.”

“!W-Why...!”

“I think... you’ll probably be freed. If I... the person Hikarijima has decided is the incarnation of evil... if I die, everything, everything will end! This ridiculous heroic legend will be over!”

His voice grew stronger as he made that declaration. He gazed into Maya’s eyes for the last time, gripped the knife firmly, and slowly, slowly opened his mouth.

“There’s one last... Just let me say one last thing. ...Maya... I... love...”

“That’s... not quite right, is it?”

That voice suddenly invaded Shouma and Maya’s world.

At some point, Hariyama-san had climbed out of the car. He called out from next to Summer, who was uneasily watching the situation unfold.

Interrupted by the man whose presence he had forgotten, Shouma answered in a dark voice, “This is none of your business, Hariyama-san.”

“Hahaha, well. I am a bit bothered you’d say that...”

After giving Shouma his usual smile, Hariyama-san spoke again, his expression a little more serious.

“Then whose business is it?”

“...!”

“Just by killing residents of your island, you’ve forced Isojima-san to make this her business. At the very least, that’s how it looks right now...”

His voice was not particularly forceful, nor did his words carry great importance.

However, his quiet voice, so at odds with the atmosphere, came as a sharp shock to Shouma and Maya exactly because he was an outsider.

"You're right, it's none of my business. But... it's because it's got nothing to do with me that I can give you an objective opinion. So for now, Shouma-kun, as a member of your neighborhood association, I'm going to take advantage of our relationship and speak my mind."

"What... It's too late for you to be telling me to treasure my life, you know...?"

In response to Shouma's irritated words, Hariyama-san began to speak, slowly, steadily-

"From what you tell us, Hikarijima... was summoned by a mage a long time ago, right? To grant a wish. But once the darkness is banished, Hikarijima's duty will be over. If that's what the island decides – and if the island decides to return to its old world—"

Hariyama-san did not say anything more.

Imagining the rest, Shouma and Maya froze completely. They had realized the cruel truth.

If the island judged that its duty had been carried out – the hero called "Maya Isojima" would no longer be necessary. The darkness would only need to be banished once. If the island then judged that it had fulfilled the terms of the summoning contract–

"I'll... disappear?"

"There's no way!"

Shouma yelled without thinking. He didn't have any proof. In fact, it was the exact opposite: it was an attempt to wholeheartedly reject the truth. His yell just now convinced no one.

Hariyama-san continued to speak, slowly, steadily, as if to drive the point home.

"That over-practical, no-good god decided a gentle boy like you was the incarnation of evil... What else did you expect from it?"

Those words dealt the final blow. The knife slid limply from Shouma's hand.

"Umm... Well, sorry, I might've gone too far, but you shouldn't worry about it. You're both still young."

Hariyama-san returned to the driver's seat, flashing his usual smile and speaking to Maya and Shouma, who stood frozen on the side of the road.

"Anyway, both of you should come to my place. Rest well tonight and—"

But the rest of Hariyama-san's sentence was drowned out by the sound of many car engines.

They were on an unexciting stretch of road, far from the train station and away from the main streets. It was rare to see three cars at once at this time of day, and Hariyama-san wore a puzzled expression as he looked at them—

He'd thought the large vans would pass them by, but all three stopped, surrounding Hariyama-san's RV.

"What's this?"

As if to replace Hariyama-san, who retreated back to the driver's seat with a troubled expression, six or seven people got out of each van... in total, about twenty of them disembarked.

At first glance, it looked as if none of them carried anything in their hands, but they wore extendable batons, knives, or thick chains at their waists. It only took a single glance to determine that they were not honest people – but when she saw the last two who came out of the vans, a boy with a blue knit cap and a young man with a red knit cap, Summer raised her voice, changing the atmosphere in just a single moment.

"Ah... ah... Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

At her scream, the praying mantis atop her head protested as he looked around, "Hey... S-Summer-chan!? What's gotten into you?"

"Those people... Those people are the ones who stabbed and shot Ginjima-san...!"

"Huh? ...Wha!? You're right!"

The delinquents who'd gotten out of the vans halted for a moment at the sight of the praying mantis, which moved inexplicably like something out of a comedy routine. They glanced at each other, searching for some explanation for the phenomenon before them, but naturally, there was no clear answer to be found.

But the red knit cap yawned, watching Summer and Tis, and muttered in a languid voice, "Hey hey, little Miss, cut it out with the ventriloquism... kay?"

"Bro, that's not ventriloquism no matter how you look at it. Doesn't look like a toy either."

"Huhh? Then it's that thing. It's a parrot in the shape of a praying mantis, right? See, it's the same color as a parrot too."

"...Well, let's go with that."

The blue knit cap let out a resigned sigh at his elder, and still looking at Tis confusedly, he and his subordinates began to circle Summer, Shouma, and Maya.



“Huh? Huh?”

The red knit cap drew a revolver from his pocket as he walked up to Shouma, who didn't understand what was happening.

“...!? A gun...!?”

It was the first time Shouma had seen a real gun since the one the policeman had been shooting on Hikarijima.

The gunshots from that time echoed through his head, and that hellish day resurfaced in his memories.

However, he could not sense a shred of a hero's aura from the red knit cap in front of him. Rather, he felt just like a normal person.

But... right now, to Shouma, the delinquent holding a gun was many times more terrifying than the heroes.

To begin with, it was clear from their actions that they did not mean well, and he knew nothing at all about who they were or what they wanted.

In front of the confused “heroes”, the “normal hitman” spoke in an utterly laid-back fashion.

“Gooooood evening!”

When the red knit cap reached Shouma and Maya, he beamed like a self-confident child as he continued to spin his revolver around and around. They were overcome by anxiety every time the muzzle pointed in their direction, but they silently continued to listen to his words.

“Well well well well, welllllll, we're really lucky. To think you would stop the car and wait for us on an empty road like this. We're so lucky.”

Maya forced herself out of the shock she had received earlier, mustered all her courage, and spoke to the red knit cap, who was clearly fooling around. “W-Who are you...?”

It was a simple question. The answer was equally simple.

"We're just some passing delinquents... yeah?"

As he gave a respectful greeting, the red knit cap shoved his face right into Maya's where she knelt.

"Hey, Sis, didn't you leave the Amida-gumi's place a little while ago? Okaaaay, you don't have to go into the details. I get it, I totally get it. So in other words, you're a pretty good woman, Sis. We're changing plans to grab both you and the brat, okay?"

"Hey, Bro, she ain't got nothing to do with..."

"She saw, didn't she? Our faces? That's bad, ain't it? So we've got no choice but to grab her, right? Well, s'what we planned from the start, so we didn't cover our faces when we came..."

The more he spoke, the more he ascertained the hopelessness of their situation. The red knit cap moved even closer to Maya's face, twisting his upper body into a strange pose.

Just when it seemed he would kiss her, he extended his tongue seductively toward her eye. The sheer boldness of running his tongue across her face made the degenerate action seem all the more perverted.

"St...Stop, you bastard!"

Just when it seemed his tongue would touch her eyelid, Shouma quickly broke free from the gun's curse and moved to hit the man in front of him.

He swung his fist in his opponent's blind spot, but... the red knit cap just managed to avoid the punch and counter, thrusting the muzzle of the shining black revolver at Shouma's brow.

"...!"

"Whoa, that was a good move. Pretty good, really. That move might've knocked me flat if I was just an amateur. ...But too bad. I might look like an amateur with a gun, but... When it comes to killing, I'm no amateur..."

"No... Shouma!"

He thrust his other hand toward Maya when she panicked and tried to jump up.

At some point, a small revolver had also appeared in that hand, and its oppressive terror was thrust between Maya's eyes.

"Too! Bad! For! You! ☆"

Even now, the man spoke as if he was joking around. He swung his head with exaggerated movements and gave Shouma a slick laugh.

"We've got no business with the man. ...So, uh, well. To sum up your fate in one short and simple word: die."

The moment he saw the man's finger move on the trigger, Shouma prepared himself for death. In that instant, he prayed to God. As he remembered Hikarijima's shrine, of all things – even if he died, please, please don't erase Maya's life.

But... the red knit cap did not pull the trigger. That was because a familiar roar reached his ears.

For a moment, he thought it was the sound of an engine passing on the road next to them—

The same noise resounded again, this time closer than before.

The noise came from deep within the woods at the side of the road, approaching them with unbelievable speed—

Oooo oaaaa a ao oooa oo AoA ooAa OAA OOA a OA oooooAAAa a aaaO aa 0000a
aOa ooooo aaaaaaaaaoa—

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

Tokorozawa, along a certain road

"That was close."

The black-suited warden spoke to the guards who had fled with him.

They held broken pieces of “staffs” in their hands and the blood had drained completely from the guards’ faces.

“U-Unbelievable... To think something so terrifying would occur...!”

The moment they had poured healing magic into the man in the warehouse – he had let out a frightening roar and begun to tear off the chains with terrible energy, his eyes completely devoid of sanity.

Sensing danger, the warden had immediately commanded his subordinates to use magic that concealed their forms and presences.

He didn’t know how effectively they would be able to hide with broken staffs, but the strange man had fled outside without seeming to notice them, perhaps because suppression was a simple form of magic.

The man who sprang out of the warehouse had grasped an axe on one of the shelves – and smashed down the wall of the warehouse, repeating his terrible roar.

He had fled immediately afterward, so they did not know what became of him.

As for themselves, they had already scored a great victory in the successful recovery of their staffs.

“For now, let’s cast the magic to hide our presences again. There’s a chance he might sense us.”

“Huh...?”

The warden spoke in an annoyed tone to the puzzled guardswomen.

“Didn’t you see him look back at us with terrifying vigor when you cast magic on him? ...I don’t know if it’s some kind of imprinting, but... His body was restored when your magic ran wild, and it’s no longer... His body has gained a composition similar to that of our own. ...No, perhaps I should say he’s become sensitized to our magic. ...He sensed our presence.”

“B-But... in that case, isn’t it strange that he didn’t come after us?”

“...You all are slow. There’s someone in this town with a ‘magical aura’ far stronger than our own, isn’t there?”

The warden was covered in cold sweat as he spoke, and the guardswomen also felt a chill run down their backs as they recalled a certain existence. An experimental “lump of magic” who had driven them into this situation.

“That strange person is most likely...”

As if to distract from their fear, the warden spoke the name of that existence in a cynical tone.

“...hunting for his prey, Number 893.”

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

‘This is bad! I have to help them...!’

Summer was also surrounded by the delinquents, but they seemed nervous and did not want to approach, perhaps intimidated by the praying mantis atop her head swinging his scythes with a buzzing noise.

She took that opening to brandish her staff, intending to rescue Maya and Shouma, but-

Just when she was about to yell the incantation, an ominous scream stopped her in her tracks.

00000oooooooooooo0oooooooooooo0oooooooooooo

“!? Wh-What, whaaat was that!?”

It was a terrible voice.

It was an oppressive scream, laden with the malice of a thousand curses, and just hearing it made one feel as if one's life was being taken. And – the source of that roar really was after her life.

As the fodder that would sustain his power – the strange man instinctively sniffed out the magical soul known as Summer.

The roar stopped; just when the people present thought silence had fallen, a black shadow swooped down atop one of the vans as if to break the stillness.

They all turned upon hearing the dull *clunk* of impact.

"Wha... The hell's with him...?"

The delinquents who hadn't been at the warehouse previously stared at the strange man who had suddenly stepped atop their car.

It wasn't that he was particularly huge, and it wasn't that he was sprouting bat wings atop his back or sharp fangs. However, that man was clearly abnormal, and the eyes of all present were fixed on him.

There was no trace of sanity in his large eyes, which were widened to their greatest extent; the axe in his right hand alone told them everything about him.

"That bastard...!? How the hell'd he find us!?" The red knit cap spat out, his revolvers still aimed at Shouma and Maya. He seemed to believe the man they had wounded earlier had come seeking revenge – but the axe man in question was not even looking at the red knit cap. Furthermore, the wound had completely healed.

"M-Monster..."

Everyone but the two wearing knit caps was on the verge of fleeing and had taken their eyes off Summer and Tis. If he had been "just any man with an axe," they might not have hesitated to do their job – but they knew the man in front of them was not just dangerous, nor on the level of a drug addict.

He looked human, but he was not. There was no way he could be human. As that spine-tingling impression swept over them, the axe man roared once again.

oooo000000o0Ooooooooo0000oooo000oooo0000

As the chilling scream resounded in the ears of those who heard it – Nambaja’s holy warrior fell even deeper into confusion. No, putting it together with Shouma’s story, perhaps it would be more accurate to say she was returning to her senses.

...Why?

She could still feel the “evil” emanating from Shouma beside her – Shouma, who had just now tried to protect her.

...Then why... Then why...!?

The man wearing the red knit cap who made her want to throw up and the strange man with the axe who instilled absolute terror – she could not sense the slightest trace of evil aura from them.

It seemed what Nambaja considered to be “evil” was completely unrelated to her own sense of values.

“Then what is it that [bring light] that god [bring light] [bring light] values [bring light] [to the world] [sweep away] [darkness] [destroy] [destroy] [destroy] [destroy]-’

As if refusing to overlook her slight suspicion, the god’s words stirred up her heart. Little by little, the noise grew sharper until she could feel nothing but the pain in her head, as if it was clawing at her brain.

And the one the noise kept telling her to kill was–

She was to exterminate the boy who from the very beginning had prepared to throw himself away to protect her, though she was after his life.

The roar rang out a third time, and in the opening provided when the red knit cap focused all of his attention on the axe man – Shouma picked up the iron pipe that had fallen to the ground beside him. The young man had turned only his neck to look at the axe man; without hesitation, Shouma swung the weapon in his hands at the back of the man’s head.

A dull thud rang out, and the red knit cap shuddered violently. The shock of being hit made him pull the triggers, and the guns in each hand let out surprisingly small bangs. The bullets brushed past Shouma and Maya, rebounded off the asphalt, and were swallowed by the darkness of the night.

“Bastard...”

The force of the impact had swung the red knit cap around so that he was no longer facing Shouma and Maya. He tried to turn around and fire again, but he noticed the axeman, who had turned around energetically at the gunshots a second ago, and instinctively guarded against him. On the other hand, Shouma stood up, completely ignoring the axe man, and kicked the red knit cap in the back with all his strength.

“Guh!?”

The red knit cap was thrown off-balance by the initial hit; it was extremely simple for Shouma’s kick to make him lose his footing, and he collapsed face-down on the ground.

And when the red knit cap got up and turned around – Shouma and Maya were nowhere to be seen, disappearing into the shadows of the cars.

Uninterested in the red knit cap’s blunder, the strange man with the axe had his gaze focused on the girl surrounded by the delinquents. He stared at the girl who was his fodder to satiate his own deranged inclinations, and to obtain the “power” preserving his body. The moment he stopped roaring, he kicked off from the roof of the van.

His jumping ability was inhuman. He jumped about as high as he was tall and then fell straight down, a distance that included the additional height of the van.

He swung the axe with both hands on instinct, just as he had many, many times in the past – what was to him an extremely natural action – swinging it straight down at the crown of the girl’s head, where the praying mantis rode.

“...Eh?”

When Summer lost sight of the jumping axe man and looked up, the man's body was already right in front of her – and the moment she noticed and tried to scream, she was forcefully drawn back.

The next instant, the axe crashed into the asphalt with a terrible sound. Summer was pulled backwards so strongly Tis lost his balance and toppled onto the road.

When she realized she had narrowly escaped death, Summer's terror passed. The instincts of the girl who was born as a magical being temporarily numbed themselves and kept her emotions at bay.

That was when she heard the voice behind her – the voice of the boy who had pulled her away and saved her.

"Stay back."

For a moment, Summer thought it was Shouma who had saved her and turned around, but—

"...It'll be bad if we let you kill the hostage."

The one standing there was the boy with the blue knit cap.

"T-Thanks, Mister with the knife... Eh, wait, but you're the one who stabbed Ginjima-san..."

As her confusion mounted, Summer's heart was thrown into disarray – but mad with rage at having his prey snatched away, the axe man decided to clear the area of all who would stand in his way. He faced the blue knit cap boy and drew back his right hand holding the weapon until it was level with his back, as if to swing.

When the spring of his body was fully coiled – multiple red holes were drilled into that body.

The blue knit cap understood the situation in an instant, and without turning around, he asked his elder behind him.

"Bro... Are you okay? What happened to those two?"

It was an innocent question, but his elder seemed a bit different from usual.

“...Just forget it.”

“Huh?”

Even as the blue knit cap spoke doubtfully, neither took their eyes off the axe man.

No, they didn’t even have the freedom to take their eyes off him.

The blood stopped flowing from the bullet holes that traced a perfect line down his body – and now, his eyes more furious than before, the axe man let out a roar.

Giiiiii gii gi AAAaaaaa gi GioooooO0OooooooooO0ooo

Humans are careless; upon hearing that scream, quite different from anything else on this planet, the delinquents took another step back, but...

“...Gii gii gii gii... Gigigigigigigigigigigigigigigi, you’re really pissing me off.”

The red knit cap gave a weak smile, his eyes also filled with rage, and whispered as if making excuses to himself.

“Enough already. I’m sick of this. I’m fucking sick and tired of it and it hurts and I’m embarrassed...”

He smiled and smiled as he funneled his madness into his trigger finger.

“This is a fucking pain, so I’m just gonna kill everyone here.”

The red knit cap cracked his neck as he spoke. He glared deliberately at everyone present, even those unrelated to the axe man, who was rendered immobile by pain. The sleek revolver instilled in the delinquents a different kind of fear than that of the axe man and they grew tense, realizing they were caught between a rock and a hard place.

Only the boy with the blue knit cap sighed and continued to watch calmly – and the red knit cap noticed something about the place where he had been standing earlier.

The car lights reflected off a dark red spot on the asphalt, which continued to spread underneath one of the vans.

When he realized it was blood from when a bullet had grazed the boy or girl earlier, the rage in his eyes remained unchanged, but the corners of his mouth pulled up, amused, amused.

"Wellll then... Who should I kill fiiirst...?"

As anger roiled ominously within him, the red knit cap aimlessly fired a shot at the sky.

The shot was surprisingly muffled due to the silencer, but it worked well enough as a sign to set everything in motion.

At the same time as the dry sound, the axe man vigorously bounded forward, swinging his blade at the boorish men who were getting in the way of his meal. In response, the youths he faced also began to move, driven forward by their leaders, who had put aside their fear of the axe man... more so by the fear of the Marubatsu-gumi behind them. Half-desperate, they sprung at the serial killer before them.

However, it was as if being shot had had no effect on him; the crazed man swung his axe with no less vigor than before. Though they skillfully avoided the axe, they were sent flying by that inhuman strength – such a sight repeated over and over. Over and over and over. Just like watching a TV on fast-forward... It was a funny and strange sight.

In the middle of the sudden confusion and tumult – Summer could only stand and watch, confused.

Not knowing what to do, unable to find the companions she was supposed to help–

For the first time in a long while, the magical girl keenly felt her own powerlessness.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

"Eee, eek, a-at this rate, Summer-chan will be killed! Or those weird guys will kidnap her or sell her off in Southeast Asia somewhere!"

The situation had devolved into complete chaos. A single insect fled to Hariyama-san's car. Tis flew in from the door to the back seat and spoke to Hariyama-san, his eyes full of pleading.

"Ha-Ha-Hariyama-san, you're an adult, right!? You can do something, right!?"

As Tis begged him for help, Hariyama-san huddled in the driver's seat and surveyed the scene outside, his expression troubled.

"Well... I said this before, but I'm just a normal person. I can't do anything that great."

"But then what was that about aliens!?"

"Well... I've had some strange experiences, but scary things really scare me. No, really."

Hariyama-san said such pathetic things; Tis was about to yell at him for being a coward, but-

"But you know, Tis-kun? There are things that only normal people can do at times like these."

"...Huh?"

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

As Shouma and Maya hid in the shadow of one of the delinquents' vehicles, they peered out at the situation unfolding on the side of the road.

Strangely enough, no cars had come through after these three vans. The wide road was completely deserted.

The fabric of Shouma's clothes around his arm was flapping loosely, perhaps because the bullet had lightly grazed him earlier, and red liquid was flowing beneath them.

Flustered, Maya was about to speak to him – but before she could, Shouma was the one who spoke forcefully.

"Somehow... We have to save that girl... Dammit, is Hariyama-san still okay?"

Even though he was the one injured, he still wanted to save the others. Not just his neighbor Hariyama-san, but even the girl he had just met today.

"I'll make some kind of opening. Maya, take that girl and run to Hariyama-san's car."

"But that's...! I can't do that! Come with us, Shouma...!"

Those words spilled from her lips without hesitation.

Perhaps there was no longer any conflict within her. She had already chosen not to kill Shouma, and her heart would not be swayed.

[Kill kill kill, fulfill your purpose in life your purpose in life your purpose in life kill kill kill kill kill kill]

As if overreacting to her choice, the god's voice was no longer making any attempts to sound like a god.

The deity's half-threats echoed within her heart, though it felt as if her eardrums would give out before her heart did. However, it was suspicious that the deity's voice passed through her ears to reach her heart.

Her feelings had already made their decision; now only her sense of reason hesitated to accept Shouma. To be precise, it hesitated not to accept Shouma, but to betray the voice of the god. It hadn't been with her very long, but the voice had been firmly assimilated into her. What would happen when she completely rejected it...? Before, she hadn't even been able to doubt her status as a "holy warrior". Memories of her past life were thoroughly impressed into her brain: she could clearly recall receiving the blessing of Nambaja and the smiles of the people of the Ancient Millennium Continent whom she had saved.

"That's all... a hallucination made up by the island...!"

She didn't want to believe it. At the same time, she wanted to believe Shouma's words. Maya was torn between conflicting emotions, but unfortunately, the situation they were caught in would not allow her time to reflect and come to an answer.

As Maya's heart wavered, Shouma was pondering ways to escape this situation.

The axe man's angry cries rang out on the other side of the van, over and over, and the cries of the delinquents echoed as if to interrupt him. The boy with the folding knife issued his calm orders and the world on the other side of the car transformed into a scene from Hell. That was the kind of nightmare that was unfolding.

However, the madness did not extend here. Regardless of whether any sanity remained within the axe man, the delinquents moved with human reason, fleeing out of a human sense of self-preservation or attempting to kill the man.

As the pure, meaningless killing intent washed over Maya and himself, Shouma felt both anger and anxiety toward the man from earlier.

Was the man with the red knit cap trying to kill the axe man?

Curious, he poked his head out, wanting to check the actions of the man who had brought despair upon them earlier–

And despair was standing right there.

Soundlessly and without any warning – the next thing he knew, the muzzle of a revolver filled his vision.

“Okay then. You made a fool of me, didncha? You ready to pay for it? Even if you aren’t, well, I’m gonna kill you anyway.”

The eyes of the man pointing a gun at Shouma and Maya were filled with an anger that hadn’t been there earlier. It wasn’t aimless killing intent like before. The red knit cap’s body was brimming with murderous intent born of definite hatred.

“Whoa... don’t think something so stupid like another car’s gonna pass by and you’ll tell them what’s up. We left ‘road closed’ signs right in the middle of the street. It’ll take at least ten minutes for someone to realize something’s up and tip off the police, you know?”

One of their guys was listening in on the police radio just in case, but there was no way they could receive communications in the midst of this chaos. Maybe the police were headed this way even now, but the red knit cap no longer cared.

“...Seems like you can keep running for ten seconds on the adrenaline, even if you get shot in the heart. Wanna try running to the hospital?”

As those words full of malice and killing intent spilled from his lips, which were twisted into a smile, the red knit cap quietly took aim.

Not at Shouma – but at the girl huddled beside him.

“While carrying your precious girlfriend.”

“—!”

The gunshot ringing out and Shouma throwing himself to the side... they happened at approximately the same time.

Maya had stiffened, realizing the revolver was pointing at her, and in the next instant – fresh blood trickled down her face.

Shouma had jumped in front of her to cover her and his shoulder burst like it had been gouged open. It seemed the bullet had only grazed him again, but whether that was a success or not... In any case, after the bullet skimmed through Maya's hair, it crashed into the asphalt and was completely smashed.

“...tch!”

Shouma's body gave a tremendous shake, and yet he did not fall. He still stood before the revolver to protect Maya, glaring strongly, strongly at the red knit cap before him.

However – in the next instant, their despair grew ever deeper.

The red knit cap seemed to want to keep provoking Shouma, but his eyes suddenly narrowed and his gaze focused on something behind them.

At the same time, Maya noticed breathing behind her in a way that inexplicably disturbed her. She could hear the yells of the delinquents: “He jumped!” “Damn, he's on the other side!” “...! Bro's over there!” “Hurry and go around!” from the other side of the van. The owners of those voices would soon appear on this side.

She immediately realized that they would be captured by the delinquents. And – that there was probably something behind her. However, all that mattered to Maya right now was that Shouma had protected her and gotten shot.

“Shou... ma... Shouma!”

Finally getting a grasp on the situation, she screamed, but...

As if to drown out her yell, the noise started again-

There was no need to understand the exact contents of the noise that resounded within her.

The god's voice... only continued to repeat: this was her chance to kill Shouma, who had been protecting her. It did not speak a word about the red knit cap.

Even though there was such evil, such darkness, right before her eyes.

Even now, the god thought of nothing but killing Shouma.

As if to say – that was just the way of the world.

'In that case, I don't want to be a holy warrior...! I don't want to be one of the heroes who save the world!'

The moment the girl yelled that within her heart–

"I... wanted... to be a hero."

With his back turned to her, Shouma murmured as if reading her mind.

"Huh...?"

Of course, it was just her imagination, but Shouma was repeating those words to himself. To pump himself up to protect the people he cared about.

"I thought about it over and over and over. After I left Hikarijima, I kept thinking that heroes weren't real. But... I couldn't throw away the idea of a hero. I couldn't bring myself to hate them."

As Shouma spoke, Maya felt the breathing of the person behind her change. The shadow cast along the ground by the streetlamps was lifting the silhouette of an axe high up.

On the other hand, the red knit cap was glaring at the delinquents, who had stopped moving.

"I just, I, I just... wanted to be like the heroes in games and manga..."

Perhaps Shouma finally saw the shadow of the axe – on the final word, he turned around and ran as fast as he could toward the axe man.

"...I just wanted to look good in front of Maya."

But – Maya saw it.

Just when Shouma moved, the red knit cap grinned and pointed the gun at his back.

The god's voice... Hikarijima knew instantly how she would act. The shrieking noise no longer formed words, shaking her brain tissues as if to control her body, but–

'Shut up. Great god.'

Maya forcibly shook off the noise, the strength of her determination running through her every nerve. She forced herself to move, and just as Shouma had done for her before, she threw herself in front of the revolver, using her own body to shield him.

On the other hand, Shouma had also become Maya's shield as he attempted to intercept the axe man who was trying to kill Maya.

As they each shielded the other, they were certain they would die.

Just when it seemed their courage would turn out to be nothing but a meaningless farce–

They were saved the god Nambaja very last possible moment.

Or to be more precise – by the attack of the magical girl who had come to think of herself as one of Nambaja's warriors.

The shockwave from her magic wand took the shape of two great serpents, which lunged forward violently and sent the axe man and red knit cap flying.

Caught off-guard by the sudden attack, the two fell some ways away from Shouma and Maya.

“...Ah, ahh... ah...”

“...What just happened...”

“Monsters...?”

She had instinctively acted to help Shouma and Maya – but when she heard the delinquents around her talking, Summer was seized by unspeakable fear and anxiety.

Though she'd blown up the Marubatsugumi's office with bombs before, this was the first time she was fighting against enemies with such clear killing intent, or against so many people who displayed such animosity.

'I'm scared.'

Everything she had not noticed before now stood out clearly in Summer's vision. The eyes of the axe man, who viewed her with twisted killing intent. The two brothers with knit caps, who were glaring as if their sharp looks could kill. And the delinquents, who were looking at her mixed curiosity, agitation, and fear after her use of "magic". It seemed Shouma and Maya didn't understand what had happened and weren't looking at Summer yet, but how would they see her in the end?

Completely terrified of all these things, the heart of the impressionable girl was dazed.

'I'm scared... I'm so scared...'

Complete terror welled up within her and the girl's body slowly stiffened. When the axe man would inevitably swoop down on her, she wouldn't be able to use magic to repel him again.

The great god Nambaja, whom Summer had abruptly come to idolize, did not offer her any help or even try to speak to her.

And then – the moment the axe man slowly lifted his arm –

The voice of a savior she held to be greater than any god resounded loudly, so loudly, through the darkness.

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

Inside the RV

Let's go back in time a little.

Tis tilted his head to the side, mystified at Hariyama-san's strange words.

"Something only normal people can do...?"

"Well, not really 'only'. But it's not something heroes really do."

Though he looked troubled, his words completely lacked a sense of danger or hopelessness. Hariyama-san slowly began to speak to Tis.

"That's right... just let someone know. The most we can do is let someone know as bystanders."

"...?"

"Let them know the situation... by giving them a call."

As he muttered that, he removed a cell phone from his pocket... and the words "Call in progress" glowed brightly in the darkness of the driver's seat.

"For example, to a yakuza acquaintance who entrusted me with his daughter..."

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

The voice cut through the dark of the night, along with Summer's hesitation.

A car was approaching, accompanied by the loud roar of an engine. It drifted past the vehicles, right to the edge of the group of people – but before the car fully stopped, the door opened and a man leapt out, clutching a long, cylindrical object in his hand.

His face was well-known among the delinquents, and the moment they saw the long sword wound running across his face, a tremor passed through them, despite their overwhelming advantage in numbers.

“Gi-Gi...”

“Ginjima...” the blue knit cap muttered. He was the only one who remained calm, but not an ounce of relaxation was to be seen in his expression.

The man in question slipped into Summer’s line of sight and stood before her, looking back at the delinquents – and asked her one thing.

“Are you all right?”

“Ginjima-san...! Yeah! I’m fine! But Maya and that boy are...”

Relieved that Summer had completely returned to normal, Ginjima turned his gaze to the situation before him.

He couldn’t see Hariyama-san and Tis, but the high school girl and a boy he had never seen before were standing back-to-back, on guard. The boy’s shoulder and arm were wounded; it seemed he had been grazed by bullets. The axe man had raised his axe, presumably ready to swing it down at someone.

But more important than any of that – wasn’t the boy with the red knit cap the one who had shot him?

They had showed themselves before Summer, not him. Ginjima immediately understood the reason, and without a yell of hatred or an angry look in his eyes, the feelings within him funneled into his throat, slowly forming words packed with emotion.

And his calm tone beat at the eardrums of the delinquents and the axe man.

“You all... Ya ready t’ cross the Sanzu River still alive, huh?” [2]

There was a strong power behind Ginjima’s words.

The meaning of his words, his voice, his bearing – all combined into an overwhelming force that struck at the delinquents.

It was not fear. They were not struck by the same fear as that instilled in them by the red knit cap and axe man.

After all, fear was nothing more than an emotion, but unyielding power resided within Ginjima's words. The strength of his spirit was evident, many, many times stronger than that of the god's voice resounding within Maya's heart.

His words not only caused the delinquents to wither completely, but even the supposedly completely crazed axe man stopped in his tracks, the raised axe held frozen in midair. Or perhaps he instinctively sensed the threat to his life in Ginjima's voice.

Ginjima's gaze pierced the enemies before him, vengeful like an apparition, and he spoke majestically as he readied the *nagadosu* in his hand.

"...I shook off the cops' questions to come here... I'm gonna finish this before the patrol cars get here."

"You bastards... standing here in front of me... Don't think I'll go easy on you."

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

What followed was terrible.

The word "overwhelming" must have been coined for such moments.

The people who each carried a weapon and were accustomed to fights, those who fought on equal footing with the axe man, and even the axe man himself, who possessed strength far surpassing that of a human – none of them were a match for Ginjima.

Ginjima slipped past the enemies' guard with the bare minimum of movements, and without even drawing his *nagadosu*, he defeated all of them with the sheath. One would think he would easily fall when fighting with his sword still sheathed, but Ginjima hit the delinquents' jaws, throats, solar plexus, and other tender spots with the point of the sheath with superb accuracy.

Though he had told them not to hope for much, Ginjima was still soft enough to hold back – but his power was so overwhelming that that softness did not hinder him.

As for the red knit cap holding the gun – those watching could well have imagined that Ginjima was simply flicking away the bullets, but in reality, **Ginjima did not allow him to even pull the trigger.**

The red knit cap intended to shoot Ginjima in the abdomen from behind – but in the next instant, Ginjima's arm twisted behind his back so forcefully it seemed his shoulder would be dislocated, and the *nagadosu* smashed heavily against the hand holding the gun.

“Gah...!”

He felt the bones in his hand being pulverized and instinctively dropped the gun. No, on the contrary, the back of his hand was swelling abnormally – he could not even hope to clench his hand the way it was now. That was how strong the attack had been.

Ginjima looked ruthlessly down at the red knit cap as he clutched his hand and moaned.

“...That’s enough for today. I really wanna kill all of you, but... your friends got taken out by that guy in our warehouse, so I’ll let you go today.”

“What... did you... say...?”

In response to Ginjima’s compassionate mutter, the red knit cap was humiliated, his pride trampled. Not only had he failed to kill Ginjima, but the man he had shot was talking about “letting them go,” as if mocking them.

“Ginjima...”

From the red knit cap’s skewed perspective, there was no greater insult. All reason fled his mind.

“Ginjimaaaaaaaa!”

As he yelled furiously, his other hand retrieved the gun and pointed it at Ginjima, but–

In the next instant, he felt a sharp chill at his throat, and his seething emotions were forced to cool down.

When he looked, his younger brother was standing next to him, calmly watching the situation with the same expressionless face as always.

"...Let's go, Bro. At this rate we're just gonna get ourselves killed."

"Y-Yeah..."

The red knit cap who had a knife at his throat listened to his brother and immediately regained his composure, glaring at Ginjima even as they retreated to the vans. The delinquents who could move tossed their injured into the vans – and without any parting words, their vans exceeded the speed limit by about thirty kilometers per hour and disappeared as if fleeing into the night. Though in truth, it really wasn't much different from running away.

Ginjima did not waste time following them. That was because he knew that anything more would just drag out the situation– and because someone else, the biggest problem, was still here.

Ginjima looked behind him – and the axe man, who until now had not moved a muscle, was just placing his hands on the ground and trying to stand.

'Should I end this? ...But how can I beat this guy?'

No matter how many times he was cut down, his wounds would heal immediately and he would stand again. Ginjima pondered how to take on that monster that looked human. Most likely he would stop if his throat was cut, but naturally, he was hesitant to do that in front of Summer.

'But he's not the kinda enemy where I can afford to say that...'

Ginjima's arms stopped moving for a moment, and he moved to protect Summer again.

"It's okay, Summer. I've got this, so you just stand back... No, go to Hariyama-san's car."

He was worried about her – but oddly enough, Summer objected.

"No... Ginjima-san."

"?"

She smiled at Ginjima's confused expression and raised her magic staff up high.

"You came for me, Ginjima-san – so now I'm at my best, right?"

And Summer turned her gaze to the monstrous axe man, who had been cut to shreds by Ginjima and yet was still able to stand.

The axe man's eyes glittered with mixed fear and anger toward Ginjima, and the same twisted killing intent as before was directed at her. Just a little while ago, that gaze had been so frightening as to make her cower in fear – but now, she would not back down even if she was afraid.

'There's someone who will spoil me later. Someone who will always listen to what I have to say.'

"So... I can do my best now! Ginjima-san!"

In the next instant, a light like that of a camera strobe shone on the tip of Summer's wand – and then the collected light kicked up a wind that blew around them. As if weaving through the wind, the band of light shot towards the axe man's body.

OH, OH, oh

The moment the light touched him, the axe man let out a roar, not understanding what was happening to him. No sooner did the roar grow duller as if slowed down than the light suddenly vanished... and the body and shadow and shape of the axe man disappeared along with it. It was as if he had melted into the darkness of the night along with the light.

"Just now... that was Summer-chan's power?"

It was a frightening display of power. Shouma and Maya definitely sensed a rush of strength that far surpassed that of the god's voice or the will of the island.

As the night once again fell silent, Shouma remembered having felt something similar before.

He suddenly realized.

That on that day – he was drawn to this town by this girl's magical power.

And that they had been saved just now at the hands of the girl who had led him here.

"Hey, Summer... that man just now, where'd you send him?"

If he'd been sent off to another town somewhere, the townspeople there would be in danger. He thought Summer knew as much, but even so, Ginjima was concerned about the axe man's whereabouts and asked just to be sure.

Then Summer gave him an innocent, childish smile – and spoke words that were greatly at odds with her smile.

"To Hell! Ginjima-san!"

-Hell.

The place absorbed the magical power of its residents and stole away all their vitality. It gave them the minimum energy needed to live, sucking away their magical power and leaving them without even the will to escape. It was where the "criminals" of the land of magic were sent – the place where Summer was originally supposed to have gone.

"I don't really know why, but I felt the same power as mine coming from his body... so I thought maybe I should send him there."

"There's a Hell in the land of magic?"

Peering outside from within the car, Hariyama-san asked Tis with fascination, who had at some point moved to sit on his shoulder. Maybe Tis was happy that he was being asked to share his knowledge, or maybe it was in reaction to his tension melting away – he puffed out his chest needlessly and responded smoothly.

"Yeah. Apparently it's a place where it's really easy for magical power to leak out into this world... It's always been that way, but ever since a mountain disappeared about three hundred years ago, the way it sucks up power has steadily gotten fiercer."

"Mountain?"

Hariyama-san's expression grew even more puzzled when he asked, and Tis slowly continued his reply.

And unfortunately, the full implications of that reply would not be understood by anyone except Shouma and Maya outside.

"They say it was probably 'summoned' to this world. ...Though I don't have the slightest idea why anyone would summon a mountain of all things, seriously."

— ♦ ♦ ♦ —

The Hariyama household, garden

Shouma and Maya sat next to each other on a wooden bench that constructed by Hariyama-san himself, looking up at the night sky.

After that, Summer had said, "If we don't hurry and leave, the officials from the land of magic will find us when they come to investigate!" They had all panicked and piled into the cars, and they had ended up coming to Hariyama-san's home.

"For now, we should come up with a good excuse and have a doctor take a look at you. If you want, I'll introduce you to an underground doctor. ...It would be bad if there was a bullet still stuck in you."

After Summer had healed Shouma's wounds, Ginjima had given his thanks and said as much – but Maya heard him as if from a strange place very far away.

It was just – she could hear sounds extremely clearly. How many days and weeks had it been since her mind had been so quiet?

She could no longer hear the god's voice.

Maya had been completely freed – and had noticed the change within herself.

Her body was radiating some sort of heat, like a kind of aura. In the beginning, she had been afraid her body would crumble as she came to reject the “island”, but that soon changed to relief.

That was because she realized: the aura coming from her body was exactly the same as the “evil” she felt from Shouma.

“Shouma...”

“Yeah. I noticed.”

“I’m sorry... It’s because of me... You’ll be hunted down too now.”

“That’s fine. I’m... sorry too. For everything.”

They were finally able to speak normally. The moment she thought that from the bottom of her heart – the other feelings she had been suppressing up until now boiled over, and Maya trembled slightly.

“Maya...?”

“S-Sorry. Shouma. I thought I was calm, but... I know thinking about it won’t solve anything, but... but...”

She began trembling more violently and tears began pricking at the corners of her eyes.

“But... I’m scared... I’m... I’m not human... I’m some kind of artificial creature...! And I’ve been thrown away by the ‘island’ that created me... I... really... don’t know if I can keep living...”

Shouma did not know how to answer, and so he said nothing for a while. But at some point after she had finished changing into normal clothes, Summer had come to stand beside them and listen, and she answered with a bright smile in Shouma’s place.

“It’s okay, Maya!”

“Oh...”

“Even if your body was made with magic, if you live a good life, you’ll definitely be happy, right?”

“Summer-chan...”

“You don’t know how I feel.” Maya was about to say, but it was immature to say such a thing to a child younger than her. Her heart still clouded, Maya gave Summer a bitter smile, but–

The girl continued in a loud voice without a hint of inferiority or hesitation.

“Because I’m **the same way!**”

“Huh...?”

Maya tried to ask what she meant, but at that point, Summer had already run off towards the porch, where she struck up a lively conversation with a boy who seemed to be related to Hariyama-san.

Maya didn’t understand Summer’s meaning, and she and Shouma gazed at Summer’s back, puzzled – when suddenly an apologetic voice came from near her feet.

“Hello, um, would you be the young lady who’s the holy warrior?”

She looked down, surprised at the voice from under her, and there was a green praying mantis that looked like a stuffed animal.

“Ahh. Though I guess it’s not really any of my business. Well, it just doesn’t sit right with me that Summer would say something that worrying with no explanation, you know?”

And so the meddlesome praying mantis began to speak.

Of the reason behind the creation of the girl known as Summer – and the life she had led until now.

Of the story of the girl who continued to walk a thinner, more unstable rope than Maya did.

As they watched the praying mantis fly toward Summer after saying his part, Maya looked thoughtful for quite a while... but she felt Shouma's gaze from next to her, and with that impetus, her expression hardened and she murmured.

"...Summer-chan's really strong. So much stronger than me..."

"...Don't you mean... stronger than 'us'?"

Shouma smiled bitterly at his own cynical words, and Maya gently returned his smile.

'I couldn't become a holy warrior – but I might still be able to become a hero.'

She didn't need the title of a hero when all she had done was be chosen by a god.

It was just – all she wanted was just to have enough courage to keep living by Shouma's side. As long as I can be Shouma's hero, that's enough for me.

It wasn't that she didn't hold any ill feelings. Even if he had his reasons, the fact remained that Shouma had killed her father. Fortunately she did not hate him for it – but resentment still lingered in the depths of her heart.

And – even if he knew they had come to kill him, it was also fact that he... that Shouma had killed his fellow islanders. Fortunately, it seemed their classmates and other acquaintances hadn't been among them. She was relieved at that, and angry at herself for feeling relieved, but still, resentment was slowly growing within Maya's heart.

But for now, she wanted the courage to accept those facts and the feelings stirring within her. And the one giving her that courage was unquestionably Shouma himself.

In the midst of their relationship, like a match pump without hope or future, the boy and the girl quietly gazed at each other. [3]

"...What will you do now?"

Shouma asked with a troubled smile, and with a troubled smile of her own, Maya responded—

“...I don’t know yet. For now, I just want to talk with you, Shouma... that’s all.”

“...I... will keep fighting against that annoying Hikarijima.”

—“Keep fighting against the island.” Those extraordinary words were terribly strange, and Shouma remembered how Maya had once looked. On that day, when everything had ended and everything had begun.

“‘We’ will, right?”

When Shouma saw his childhood friend smile as she said that, like a puppet whose strings had been cut—

Perhaps Shouma had reached the limits of his strength. As she supported his body, which had fallen to lean against her – the girl who was once a hero smiled wryly at her own cowardice.

She didn’t think she yet possessed the courage to embrace the person she loved.



Tokorozawa suburbs, Hariyama residence

After everything was over, Hariyama-san changed into his nightclothes and reached for the diary on his desk, as if he was doing nothing particularly extraordinary.

Hariyama-san opened the red cover of the book, grabbed a pen, and began to write down the events of today.

After he spent a while reminiscing on all that had occurred – the indolent man wrote only the same two sentences as always.

“Today was the same as always.

“May we all be happy and healthy tomorrow too.”

The veritable mountain of other events he should have written about was instead stored in his memory. Hariyama-san wrote only about today's peaceful results and his hopes for tomorrow, then slowly closed his diary.

Then, to replenish his energy, he climbed into the futon next to his already-sleeping wife and promptly closed his eyes.

Because tomorrow would bring another day much the same as today.

Notes:

[1] Terrible pun. The word they're actually throwing around is "positive", written "pojitibu"; in this line, the red knit writes the last "bu" with the kanji for "club", so it's pretty literally a positivity club.

[2] Sanzu River: Buddhist equivalent of the River Styx. Also worth noting that Ginjima's speech gets really rough here and slips into gangster drawl, way more exaggerated than anyone else ever uses. I can't write gangsters.

[3] Apparently the phrase "match pump" is one of those terms made up in Japan but written in English. It refers to causing a problem (starting a fire with a match) and then going to great effort to solve it (dousing it with a water pump), either unknowingly or knowing full well that you're causing trouble. That said, I'm not really sure how the metaphor applies here.

Part 3

Urban Legend (Secret)

“Lulu. Can I... ask something?”

What is it, Muu?

“That urban legend... I’ve heard it too... Did you know there’s been a ‘sequel’ going around lately?”

Sequel?

“Not quite a sequel... Well, you know how if you meet *Kuchisake-onna*, you’ll be saved if you yell ‘pomade’? Something like that. But instead of doing something in particular... If you know the story, you won’t meet that urban legend anymore.”

Huh, I didn’t know that. What do you mean?

“Yeah. The story is already over.”

The demon king fell in love with one of the heroes who came to kill him. That heroine also fell in love with the demon king who had killed her allies one after another.

They both faltered, and in the end, neither was able to kill their opponent – and they began to talk to each other.

And so the two of them realized. They ended up realizing. The huge power that enveloped them. The secret of the online game they had been playing-

That from the outset, there had been a scheme built into the online game made by the game maker “Hikarijima”. A particular sound and light pattern within the game slowly stole away their human reason; they could no longer tell the difference between reality and games, and they were being used in a certain country’s military experiment.

The people who realized this were designated “demon kings” by “Hikarijima” and targeted by the players who couldn’t tell the difference between reality and games.

The demon king had realized he could increase the number of people like him, and so he started calling out to them.

“Are you a hero?”

But it had a different meaning than before.

To win them over to the demon king’s side, so as to destroy the maker called Hikarijima.

Over, and over – until the day they crushed “Hikarijima”.

“That’s the story I heard from a friend.”

It suddenly got really unrealistic. The story I heard had to do with the Internet and taking games too far. It had a lot of realistic parts. And... to begin with, I haven’t heard of the game maker Hikarijima, you know?

“Yeah... but you know, I like this story a lot better.”

Why?

“...Because it’s unusual.”

What is?

“...An urban legend that ends with someone being happy...”

“Even if he is a demon king.”

But did the demon king really become happy?

“...What do you think, Lulu?”

Hm... I think he did, for sure.

“Really?”

I... want him to be happy.

“...Yeah.”

Let's think about it. How can the demon king really become happy?

And then – this time we'll spread the rumors. Okay?

And so – today a new legend was born in this town.

The prayers of those who told the story of fear and those who told the story of smiles came together.

And slowly, slowly–

–With a man by the name of Hariyama at the center of the miracles–

–fin.

AFTERWORDS

Afterword *Urban Legend*

First published in *Dengeki hp* Issue 31

To all the newcomers, it's nice to meet you! And to everyone else, it's been a while. This is Narita.

That said, thank you for reading *Urban Legend*!

Well, there's a lot going on, so the afterword this time is split into four parts! That said, my editor seems to have something planned for these afterwords, but he let me write it normally anyway...!

In any case, *Urban Legend* was published as part of the "Horror and Mystery Feature" of *Dengeki HP* last summer. In those days, I only had vague plans for *Hariyama-san*; I only dropped his name in the story in passing, and it was because of that link that it came to be published in this book!

It's the type of story that has two different sides to it, "front" and "secret", like in *Baccano! 1931* – and there's one thing I'd like to advertise...

"The *Baccano! 1931* radio drama will be broadcast this fall!"

I'm sorry that this has nothing to do with *Hariyama-san*, but right now, I'm frankly amazed that one of my works is making the transition to a radio drama for the first time...! This couldn't have happened without the support of all you readers. Thank you very much...!

And for everyone who is reading my work for the first time, I'll be happy if you take this opportunity to pick up one of my other series...!

Afterword *Magic Girl Number 893*

First published in *Dengeki hp* Issue 33

And so, thank you for reading *Magic Girl Number 893*!

This story was the first to be published under the title *Hariyama-san, Center of the World*, so there were several things I was nervous about. I had little experience focusing on a single character instead of an ensemble cast – but just watching that magic mature splendidly made me happy!

Strangely, when I began this story, I bought a limited edition *Ace Combat 5* memory card from Namco. The dogtag serial number happened to be “893”, and so I felt a frightening twist of fate as I wrote.

I don’t know much about the magical girl genre, and I ended up writing a lot about what they’re like... but I was worried I was destroying the image of a magical girl...!

Yasuda-san’s magical girl design is really superb; it had such an impact on me that I was tempted to add another side character: “*The Tragedy of the 37,564th Person* hasn’t been published yet... if the second volume comes out, the saga will be complete!”...

Incidentally, the bamboo girl and panda on the back cover are original characters spontaneously drawn by Yasuda-san. T-They... will they appear in a later volume of *Hariyama-san*...!? And so, please look forward to *Hariyama-san*, irregularly published in *Dengeki hp*, from here on out!

Afterword *Dear Sir Hero of Light*

First published in *Dengeki hp* Issue 34

And so, thank you for reading *Dear Sir Hero of Light*!

This is most probably the first “bad end” story I’ve written, and sure enough, as I wrote it, I was excited about how it would be received...

On the Internet and in the mail, people often say things like, “Narita only ever writes happy ends.” I want to answer in a loud voice, “I can write these properly too!”... but

I've already reached the point where it doesn't matter. That's because the moment I write this, I'll get mail from those same readers saying, "Bad ends aren't like you, Narita..."! W-What do I do...!?

Well, to tell the truth, I've had this story in mind ever since my debut. It wasn't written in response to what the readers think or say. Sorry...!

This is the first time I saw Enami-san's illustrations of the boy and girl in school uniform, so I definitely felt refreshed as I read it...! For the title illustration, it seemed making a piece where the characters don't really stand out was a challenge, but I was looking forward to seeing this wonderful work of Enami-san's... (I still haven't seen the completed version)!

This short story had an unusual writing style for me, in that it was in the first-person perspective of a man from beginning to end, but I'd appreciate it if you'd keep in mind that I can do this too...!

Afterword *Hariyama-san, Center of the Miracles*

New text

And so, thank you for reading this book!

This story more closely resembles my past works. The characters from the preceding three short stories all meet up, and I was able to depict what happened to them afterwards.

This book is a collaboration between two illustrators, and it seems they faced several challenges that had not previously come up in *Dengeki Bunko*. Yasuda-san said something like, "This book is the result of the author, artists, and editor going wild in their own ways," and I definitely feel the same way... No, wait, I was calm and in control the whole time.

The front cover was done by Yasuda-san and the frontispiece by Enami-san, but for some reason, I feel like it's too good for me and makes me want to apologize...! Thank you very much!

And to my supervisor Wada-san and the editor-in-chief, who helped with the planning, as well as the *Dengeki Bunko* editing department, publishing department, sales department, and everyone else in MW. My family and friends, especially everyone in S City, and all the authors who encouraged me and gave me advice as I was writing. As well as all you readers who picked up this tumultuous book, thank you very much! Thank you for your support, continuing with the renewal in *Dengeki hp* this month!

“I feel like I did nothing but advertise this time.” Ryohgo Narita. (But what in the world is my editor planning...?)

